

TWO LEAVES
AND A BUD

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TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

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KUTUB-POPULAR
BOMBAY

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First Published in London 1937

First Indian Edition 1946

Second Indian Edition 1951

Third Reprint 1966

523
111

Set in Linotype 10 point Caledonia face

Printed in India

PRINTED BY KRISHNA S. KURWAR AT MOHAN MUDRANALAYA,
ACME INDUSTRIAL ESTATE, SEWRI BUNDER ROAD, SEWRI (EAST),
BOMBAY 15 DD AND PUBLISHED BY G. R. BHATKAL FOR KUTUB-
POPULAR AT 35C, TARDEO ROAD, BOMBAY 34 WB

To
MONTAGU SLATER

TWO LEAVES
AND A BUD

1

'LIFE is like a journey', thought Gangu as he sat by Buta, the Sardar of the Macpherson Tea Estate, in the toy train that was going up to Assam.

He could see the engine of the narrow-gauge railway puffing and panting as it skirted the edge of an incline through the jungle.

'A journey into the unknown,' he said to himself, as his gaze was beaten back by the dark recesses of the foliage that seemed to swallow up the line.

He looked at his wife, Sajani, who sat facing him, with his fourteen-year-old daughter, Leila, on one side, and his son, Buddhu, on the other. She seemed distant, absorbed in something, far away from him. What was she thinking? he wondered. Why was she not connected with him? How could she forget the deep intimacy that had subsisted between them since their youth? How could she leave him alone to face the responsibility of thinking out what life held in store for them in the new home? Why couldn't she talk to him and give him faith, strengthen his hope rather than merely depend on him? Once, in their youth, when she had come as a newly wedded bride, she had sung to him that song which was one of the most popular melodies of the year in the hills, *Companion of my Life and Death*. And, always that tune had haunted him. He had wished to believe that it was true, that it was possible for a man and

woman to be companions in life and death together; which every one had to face alone, but even in life, ultimately, people usually travelled very much by themselves, unless they accepted each other, really took to each other.

The children, Leila and Buddhu, looked eager and excited, in spite of the fact that they were gummy-eyed from several nights of sleeplessness. But they were unthinking little things, reflected Gangu. They were spontaneous and natural, happy and trusting, slaves to anyone who would win them over with the gift of a sweet or a toy. They had no appreciation of the pain that lies quiescent under everything, the suffering that men imposed on themselves and each other.

The other passengers, mostly coolies from various parts of India, except for a few flat-nosed, narrow-eyed hillmen, and an odd Bengali Babu, seemed to be smoking or dozing or sleeping contentedly.

'But then', Gangu mused, 'they are young and healthy, and I am getting old. I have only a few years to live; and I should have liked to die among my kith and kin rather than in this jungle, already three days' and nights' journey from Hoshiarpur'. For a moment, he felt as if the worm of death was crawling through his belly, and gnawing at the flesh inside him; and he looked deep into the forest on his side, teeming thick with a vegetation that seemed to suffocate the very air around it, and to spread a grisly, green chill across the sky. The demons, the tree-spirits, the wild lions and elephants and bears, the reptiles, chameleons, lizards and dragonflies with which his imagination had always peopled the

forest, swarmed in the murky waters of hell, as in the pictures of the netherworld he had seen, with the two-horned Yama, the God of Death, towering supreme, a skull in his left hand and a sword in his right.

He shook himself and switched his mind off to the little mud hut by the tank in his village in the district of Hoshiarpur.

It seemed a pleasant home now, inspite of the cracking beams of its ceiling which he had had to support by piling logs of fuel wood, inspite of its crumbling walls, sodden by the damp of four floods, and in spite of its doorlessness. And he wished his brothers had not mortgaged it with the land. But what could he have done to avert its being confiscated, since the hut as well as his three acres were part of the joint family property, and Lalla Beli Ram, the vakil, had told him that, as the law of Angrezi Sarkar stood, the debt incurred by one brother of a family was binding on another? 'Strange,' Gangu thought, 'how the interest on my younger brother's mortgage piled up, so that all my three acres and my hut as well went just as a free gift to Seth Badri Dass. But I couldn't have borne the disgrace on my white hair and lowered the name of my ancestors by begging like a pauper in the streets of Amritsar if I had gone there and not been able to get a chowkidar's job. My brother is young and he got work in the Dhariwal woollen mills. But for me this service is better. Buta certainly seems to have money, and he says I shall have land and cattle and become a Sardar like him. And he was only a poor barber at home. It seems almost like becom-

ing a sepoy, going to this plantation with all the splendid prospects. Even better. For the men who recruited as sepoys from my village only got a free railway pass for themselves, but these sahibs have paid the fares for all the members of my family. Of course, I am old and couldn't have gone to the army. I hope that these sahibs won't object to my age!

'Are the sahibs kind, brother Buta Ram?' he asked the Sardar who had recruited him.

'Just like *mai-bap* (mother and father),' replied the Sardar, shifting the coconut basined hookah from where he held it to his mouth, cupped in his two hands, and brushing the hair of his yellow-red, tobacco-stained moustache upwards. And he continued: 'If any one needs money for something special such as the purchase of a cow, for marriage or for the propitiation of the ancestors' ceremony, the sahibs advance it free of interest, and recover it only gradually. The Manager Sahib knows and cares for all his people. He attends to their well-being, and he keeps them happy and contented. The Manager Sahib and the Assistant Manager Sahib are very fond of us folk, and advise and assist us in our marriages and in our thousand-and-one family affairs. Besides, they hold sports and distribute prizes every now and then. There is a real affection between the labourers and the sahibs, believe me, and we all turn to them for help and advice, even in the most intimate matters.'

'What is the rate of interest the sahibs charge on loans?' asked Gangu, obsessed by his fear of the money-lenders, since he had suffered from them all

his life and had had to leave home because of them.

'As everywhere else,' said Buta, shortly, screwing his jaundiced eyes uncomfortably and twisting his neck as if he were swallowing some unpleasant physic. Then, avoiding Gangu's searching inquiry, he added: 'No more, no less.'

Gangu sensed the discomfort he had caused Buta and, with a smile of abject apology, retreated into himself to search for the cause of the peculiar thumping that had started in his heart. He felt confused. A vague suspicion about Buta crept into his soul. But he tried to suppress it by suggesting to himself that now that he was on the way he should look on the bright side of things.

'So the sahibs are nice to their employees, nicer than our landlords,' he ventured.

'The new labourer,' said Buta gruffly, to cover up the embarrassment which he had felt in answering Gangu's question about the rate of interest, 'begins the tea garden life free and square, because here he has no debts. And if he has other debts to pay, the sahibs will advance him money on interest, to pay the moneylenders of his village. Besides, at the very beginning the labourer receives a bonus from which his fare to the plantation is paid. And then later on he can send away money to his relations if he so wills. Lakhs of rupees are sent away from the tea gardens every year.'

At the sound of the word 'lakhs,' Gangu's face lit with a smile of false assurance: he was half mocking at this promise of fabulous wealth, and yet he half believed it as one believes a fairy tale.

At the sound of the word 'lakhs,' the face of

Gangu's wife, Sajani, was surcharged with a glow of wonder. She who had sat brooding, now on her husband, now on herself, shuffled like a hen, rearranged the apron round her head, and stared furtively around to see if everyone believed in the possibility of this miracle. For though she had no idea of the value of money, though she could not even count up to a hundred, the sound of 'lakhs' made her feel that the place to which she was going must be a veritable paradise.

At the sound of the word 'lakhs,' the other coolies lifted up their faces, turned and stood tensely stretched, surprised and afraid.

'The labourer and his wife,' continued Buta, piling it on thick now that he saw that not only Gangu, but his wife and the other coolies were applying their ears, eyes, heads and hearts to his utterance, 'have more than ample for their needs. If thrifty, they are soon able to buy jewellery. And, after a time, they can save enough to go back to their homes to purchase land.'

'But didn't you say, brother Buta Ram, that the sahibs give every labourer a plot of land free of charge, as a sort of gift?' remarked Gangu, screwing up as much courage as he could in his kindly, enthusiastic, but weak-willed nature, in an effort to be blunt and realistic in face of the Sardar's golden promises.

'True, true,' said Buta, waving his hand rather impatiently, to put the weight of external emphasis on his words. 'True,' he repeated, 'I did tell you that. And, by the grace of God, you will soon find yourself the owner of a field in which you can cultivate

rice. But you may have to wait for that gift a little. If God says pull, He will give you a rope : if He says ride, He will give you a horse. But you must be patient at all costs; you must be patient.' And, as if he had pronounced an oracular truth, he stopped short suddenly and, smiling, looked round for appreciation.

But the applause was not forthcoming. For the insistent overtone of his speech did not hide the obvious insincerity of its content. And Gangu, though broken and defeated, was a shrewd enough peasant whose bitter sufferings had inclined him to measure every particle of speech even as the sahuakar of his village weighed every grain of wheat. He knew somehow that he was being deceived. But he loved the land. And knowing full well the real worth of a contract with a glib-tongued scoundrel, he yet refused to accept that instinctive knowledge in his bones, and he hovered uneasily in the atmosphere of suspicion created by Buta's ambiguous qualification of the promise he had made with such a boastful flourish in the village. For Gangu felt that he could do without everything else, if only he could get land.

'Many thousands of labourers have settled on the land in Assam', said Buta, to fill the chilly void that had arisen through the lull in the conversation. 'after they have retired from plantation work. These folk like to remain near the gardens though, so that their children can work. You will be all right. You have seen that the sahibs have paid your fares. They will give you a house, a nice house, built with brick in the angrezi manner, with a tin roof. They will give you everything, everything. Believe me. Don't call

me by the name of Buta if they don't do well by you, call me a dog instead. I can't guarantee more than that, can I?' And he brushed his moustache upwards to wipe off the gems of saliva that had covered them through this peroration.

Gangu recalled the proverb so often repeated in the North: 'Never believe a barber or a brahmin, for the one arranges marriages, and has to describe an ugly girl as a fairy, and the other draws horoscopes, and must make the evil stars appear the luckiest.' And Buta, the barber, had only left his profession of traffic in women to take up the profession of traffic in men.

'Our Leila is growing up', said Sajani to her husband though she meant the remark for the ears of Buta. Being more gullible like most women, she had been completely taken in by his promises.

'You trust me to look after that, mother,' replied Buta, easily. 'I am not the son of Tota Ram, the Chaudri of barbers, if I can't arrange a match for that beautiful girl. There are plenty of flourishing men here, with good names, from our parts'.

The discussion of her future, Buta's left-handed compliment, and her father's hard stare seemed to embarrass Leila, and she cast her head down, suppressed her smile, and tried to avoid everyone by calling her little brother :

'Vay, Buddhu, come, let me clear the grit from your eyes.'

Gangu looked across her to the coolies who were sprawled about in different postures on the wooden bunks of the compartment. They all seemed to be small and spineless. And there was none among

them to whom he felt he could have handed over his daughter, except perhaps to a young boy with features like the God Krishna, who was being sick from the ascent of the train to high altitudes.

He averted his gaze from the unfortunate coolie at the faint suspicion of sympathetic nausea in his own mouth, and scanned the hills and the valleys which the cog-wheeled train had scaled. From the even plain where the narrow-gauge line had started the day before to the mountains over which it progressed now, there had been a miraculous change. The vast panorama of the lowlands with their view of quaint husbandry and glimpses of villages embedded in mango-groves seemed to have been left behind long ago, also the easy slopes with their grassy valleys full of palm-groves and ricefields, and the railway now travelled on the edge of a high bluff overlooking the deep recesses of a forest filled with mist like soft down, from which the hilltops emerged like little islets in a river. Presently it encircled the edge of a hill, and came out to face the sun which was scattering the clouds. The slow pace of the train seemed to quicken at the wonderful lap across the suspension bridge which connected two rocks over a ferocious stream. And, for a moment, Gangu looked with beating heart down a precipice some thousand feet below. But the carriage swerved round a curve and disclosed a few miles of dense, coarse grass, deeply entangled in the bushes, but smiling with its wild rhododendrons. At several points, the curves of the line were so sharp that Gangu could see both the engine in front and the passengers seated in the last carriage behind. Then there was

a grim race through a series of long tunnels, dark as sudden calamity, and chockfull of a foul smoke. But, through the zigzag course of the rail, there now appeared frequent intervals of cultivated slopes between masses of grand forest—vivid green terraces of rice-fields, amid cascades of lovely creepers hanging in festoons from tree to tree and from crag to crag. He felt he would like to jump out to the edge of these elysian fields and settle down there for ever. But the inexorable rush of Time's black ghost, the engine, dispersed his thoughts over foaming waterfalls in the deep ravines which were dashing their spray into the verdurous abysses, sent them running round the steep precipices unclimbable by man or goat, threw them up gradients and down gradients, involved them in sensational crossings from rock to rock. So that he sat startled, unnerved and timid, feeling his big brave heart which had seldom been afraid, contract to the size of a grain, till, from the edge of a vertical precipice, he could see clustered huts and gardens.

'That is the Brahmaputra Valley Tea Garden, which was the earliest estate in the district,' said Buta, gathering up his baggage. 'We will soon get to the station and there will be a motor gari to take us to the Assam valley a few miles away.'

Gangu looked out with the others and saw that the hills had begun to drop towards a vast plateau, neatly interspersed with rows of plants.

'That is the tea plant which grows on the acclivities,' said Buta, determined to impress his listeners, 'and those who work on them are enviable spectators of the wondrous bungalows which the sahib log have

built on the giddy heights. Wonderful this angrezi race! They have spanned rivers and conquered the Spirits of the Forests !'

Gangu looked across the steaming low valley at the simmering heat of the sun, and then withdrew his eyes to look inwards. There was again a vague perturbation in his soul, the ache of an unapprehended doom.

A few hoarse shrieks, a piercing whistle, a mighty phuff-phuff and a fierce grinding of the brakes, which little Buddhu noticed more than anyone else, and the train came to a hesitating halt by the prim square hut of Garhi station.

The coolies dispersed in batches of five or six towards the different plantations for which they were recruited.

The motor-lorry which Buta had promised was not at the station, but the family was quite willing to walk and stretch its legs after the enforced sedentariness of three days in the train.

For a mile or two the walk through the undulating country was pleasant enough. They passed through the fertile valley and a series of rice-fields where a solitary mud-enamoured buffalo was harnessed to a steel plough such as Gangu had never seen in his life. To the west stretched the Robertson Tea Estates for five miles, and to the east rose the mountains higher and higher to the scruff-covered peak of Nandi Parbat which gleamed so brightly that Sajani raised her joined hands to it and prayed, with all the fervent devotion of the credulous woman who believed that the silver light reflected by the scruff was the angry glance of the great God Siva.

But the plain ended and the slow crawl through the virgin forest was difficult, especially as Buddhu wanted to be carried all the time. For there was only the track of a footpath through the jungle of ferns, ilex and rhododendrons, with its thick undergrowth of grass and its turgid atmosphere of clammy heat. Gangu felt tense in the uncanny air of its dark labyrinthine recesses, blind and empty, as if, in his utter inability to distinguish one leaf from another, one branch from another, even one tangled bush or tree from another, he had become one with the festering shade of this green hell. The steady drip drip of the moisture, with the queer inhuman shapes of the vegetation created phantasmagoric visions in his brain, and the eerie noises in which commingled the stirring of a million insects with the beetle's deep clarion note on top, made him think once more of the heaven that is promised to the righteous after their purity of heart has been tried through the tortures of hell. From time to time, he looked to see how far his wife and children had been left behind. But, even as the heroines of old, they were following close upon him, rapt in their advance towards the promised paradise of plenty, without complaining about the occasional thorns that pierced them, and the hunger that throbbed in their bellies.

'All men brave the unknown in their search for food,' said Buta, waxing philosophical in order to keep up the spirits of the cavalcade. 'And we from the North are born adventurers.'

A seven-mile tramp across the snake-like winding track, and they emerged to face the April sun, pouring down its afternoon heat over the insurmountable

barriers of tall mountains into the stretch of peaceful plateau that Buta pointed out as their destination.

But the Sardar led them to a small wooden shed before they had lifted their eyes to survey the gangs of coolies who were busy plucking and pruning at various spots among the layers of the hard tea-bushes, the pretty bungalows which stood on sun-soaked knolls surrounded by little paradises, and several tin boxes of houses. And before they knew where they were, they were face to face with Babu Shashi Bhushan Bhattacharya about whose importance Buta had told Gangu a great deal on the way.

A mercurial being, with a thin body, and a foxy face, with a wild shock of hair, the Babu greeted them thus in broken Hindustani.

‘What hour is this to arrive on the plantation? Jungli folk! The sahibs are having siesta, and the office time is about to be over.’

‘Babuji,’ said Buta, joining his hands with a humility such as hitherto Gangu had not seen him exhibit anywhere, either in the village or on the way, ‘it is very difficult to get recruits to come so far away from their homes. And I beg you to register them.’

‘All right,’ the Babu said, ‘but don’t forget the arrangement you made with me before you went on leave.’

At this, Buta lifted his hand and sought to camouflage assent by a salute.

Gangu had never known one man talk to another in the language of gesture except in order to arrange the terms of a secret contract for money. He was convinced that Buta had promised to pay the Babu a bribe. And he began to fear that, as in the district

court of Hoshiarpur, so here, an atmosphere of twisting and turning prevailed. But his thoughts were disturbed by the appearance at the door of a tall sahib, stooping shyly.

'Hello, Shashi Bhushan,' said the sahib, mispronouncing the Babu's name.

Shashi Bhushan struggled with his chair in an attempt to rise suddenly to salute the sahib, and to slip his feet into the shoes which he had discarded under the table.

'Salaam, Huzoor', said Buta, taking his hand to his head.

There was a queer tension in the air at the entry of the white man, so that the coolies went pale with fear and excitement.

The sahib casually pointed towards Gangu and his family, and said jerkily in broken Hindustani, 'I will do the medical to-morrow morning. They must be tired now. Let them go to the billets that have been cleaned for them.'

'Yessir, yessir', said Shashi Bhushan, getting up at last and nodding continuously.

At this, the sahib veered round and left.

'Good day, sir,' shouted Shashi Bhushan, smiling nervously and all of a flutter.

The coolies were pleased to be let off, as their limbs ached for rest.

'Jao,' ordered Shashi Bhushan. 'The Dr. Sahib will examine you to-morrow.'

The cavalcade began to file out of the office.

'Buta,' called the Babu. 'Listen to my talk for a minute.'

2

JOHN DE LA HAVRE was possessed by thought of death as he walked away from the office towards the planter's bungalow. He had been working all day in his primitive laboratory, observing cultures of bacilli under a very inadequate microscope, and he had become immersed in the tinted microcosm of the infinitesimal cells which mirrored destruction with a beauty and grace which compelled fascination.

But all chemical disintegration was inherent in nature, he reflected in a rather depressed vein. All the processes of change, colouring and unification were complementary to chemical decomposition. And what was true of nature was true of society. Social development also was a complicated process of action and reaction, of separation and systematization, in so far as an individual existed only in his relation to the community, in so far as he was the product of the climate in which he was born and reared, of the customs of the society in which he grew up, of habit and chance, of heredity and of all the transformation in the atmosphere in and through which he lived and flowed into the lives of other human beings.

A gust of breeze bearing the smell of urine from the foot of a coolies' latrine by the road assailed his nostrils. He lifted his head towards the mountains, as if by so doing he could inhale the pure, clear air

of the distant vistas. But the urinous smell persisted.

'No septic tank latrines,' he muttered to himself with contorted face, and hastened his steps. The picture of hook-worms among the puddles of urine formed itself in his mind, and then the image of their eggs, microscopic even under a microscope. There must be thousands of them hatching under such favourable conditions, he thought. And millions of mosquitoes.

If only those syndicates could stop and think for a minute, they would know that it was in their own interests that the coolies should not suffer from anæmia and listlessness. The world was mad, mad, heading for self-destruction. If only the directors had sanctioned his plan to stem the tide of cholera that had arisen year after year and carried hundreds of lives away!

'And I have been sweating for months, maturing my plan, and I bet the mail to-day will bring no news at all, or only bad news. And there is that outbreak in the cowherds' village only ten miles away, and it's bound to spread.'

He stopped still on a high promontory by the road to the planter's bungalow, from where he could command a view of the whole valley. The small ranges of the Nefa faced him in the north, and beyond, the snowclad mountains, beautiful and unconquered and tempting. De la Havre felt an ache of eagerness in his bones, urging him towards the precipitous rocks, cut like scarps of fortresses. Scaling the heights of tall mountains, he had discovered in answer to one of his interminable selfquestionings.

was like reaching the summits of one's own genius after arduous battles in search of philosophic truth.

On the foothills of the most immediate range lay the vast, unexplored forests of Northern Assam, stretching one did not know for how many hundreds of miles, infested with mosquitoes and fireflies, geckoes, bloodsuckers and all the other malignant creatures which presented such a virulent challenge to the existence of humanity.

And lower down was a world of thinner vegetation, mainly moss-covered bamboo and rubble and low bush, for about ten miles.

At the end of this, the tea estate started, reaching up to the ridge where the planter's bungalow stood like a highland castle, except that it was built of wood and more in the style of the pavilion on the racecourse at Epsom Downs, though instead of opening out to a stretch of earth and heaven like the Epsom grandstand, it nestled among the fir-trees and the tall hedges that had been planted to secure privacy for the tennis-court and the miniature golf-links in the compound.

There, on a side, perched up on a hill, was the bungalow of Reggie Hunt, the assistant planter.

His own hut was on a gravelly spot behind the hospital, two hills away from Reggie's, thank goodness, overlooking the miles of tea garden on the right and the left, and hanging precariously above the road which bridged the swishing cataract of the river.

The coolies' lines were on the edge of the stream, almost in the basin of the valley, rising in terraces tier by tier over the flooded fields of rice attached to

them, and leading to a slope of twenty thousand acres beyond, which constituted the bulk of the other five estates with their population of eleven thousand.

The south was the endemic area from which cholera spread regularly every year. The fear of death by cholera had scared some of the coolies of the low-lying plantations, and recruiting was becoming more difficult in the plains. If he could have a chance he knew he could get at the root of the trouble. But did anyone have his way here?

The whole bloody thing was fantastic in its futility. Such a simple scheme he had devised. The water supply was at fault. It was the main source from which the disease spread. And it was criminal not to do anything about it. All the gardens in the area drew their water supply from wells, except two; Macara's estate, which got its water from a natural spring, and this, Macpherson estate, which got it from the stream, through a pipe; and all these sources were unsatisfactory. The best plan was to bring water from the hills by means of pipes, to keep it in a central tank for each garden, and to supply individual households from it. It would cost a lakh to two lakh of rupees. But it would be worth it. Still, there might be good news waiting for him, and he strode forward more briskly.

He walked up to Croft-Cooke's bungalow, just as old Ilahi Bux, the khansamah, came easy-footed to the veranda, and dreamily bent his supple, white-coated form over his red cummerbund, to strike the gong for tea.

'Is the Sahib up?' asked de la Havre, ascending the

broad wooden steps under the canopied porch and flinging his white helmet on to a hat-stand which stood in the veranda.

'No, Huzoor,' answered Ilahi Bux, showing his yellow, decaying teeth in a wheezy obsequious smile. 'Cha rery.'

'Yes, Doctor,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, stepping out of the drawing-room with a giant stride of her tall, ample body. 'Come and sit down. My husband is just finishing his bath.' And she extended a rather small hand limply towards de la Havre. He shook it quickly, eager to get over the first formal impact.

The stags' heads, the bearskins and other trophies of the hunt, that glared down at him from above the small decorative palms, always made him feel as if he were in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, except that the Victorian sideboard, the large life-size portrait of the Royal Family, the grand piano, the assortment of glided Queen Anne chairs, the Louis XIV chandelier which hung from the ceiling, and the studied array of multitudinous knick-knack, were more reminiscent of an antique shop opposite Harrods.

'How are you all?' he said to cover his embarrassment.

'Boiling hot! I can't bear this heat, Doctor! Last year I had eczema and now the skin on my face is beginning to peel off again. And I am afraid of the old trouble with my eyes. I only wish Charles would give up all this, and we could go home,' expostulated Mrs. Croft-Cooke, all in one half-whining, half-aggressive mouthful. 'And Barbara must get out of this wretched hole. She can't remain buried here all

her life. There's Reggie——!' she broke off abruptly. 'Hallo, Reggie!'

De la Havre was still vaguely irritated by the exaggerated *bonhomie* that Mrs. Croft-Cooke exuded, although he had realized long since that it had become almost second nature with her through her long stay in India.

'Hallo,' said Reggie, lifting his handsome, blotched face from his white open-collared shirt as he walked up the steps, and tossed his tennis-racket aside.

'Hallo,' said de la Havre to Reggie, in a voice which dropped to a whisper on account of its owner's attempt to keep it even.

'Aren't any of the others turning up?' asked Reggie, as he flung himself rather recklessly into one of the wicker chairs which stood round the tea-table.

'Charles! Barbara! Tea!' called Mrs. Croft-Cooke.

But before the thin, reedy voice had travelled into the house, Charles Croft-Cooke emerged, a small, grey-haired man of fifty-four, less imposing than his wife, but hard and self-assured, as he held his head high, and greeted the company with an indifferent, 'Good afternoon.'

'I thought Tweetie was coming here to-day for tennis,' said Reggie, 'and Macara and Hitchcock.'

'Hallo everybody,' shouted Barbara, flinging her arms in the air as she came out a little dramatically after her afternoon snooze. She was flushed a rich bronze, and looked full of high spirits.

'Oh, it is too hot for tennis, Reggie,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke.

'Some feel the heat more than others,' said Bar-

bara pertly.

'Don't be cheeky, Babs,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke. 'I feel the heat. Of course I feel the heat. I was just telling Dr. de la Havre about the eczema I had last year. And all my skin is beginning to peel off again. I have said all along that Charles ought to write for his bonus and retire, so that we could go home.'

'Dreadful, Daddy, why did you take a job like this?' mocked Barbara.

'Cheeky one!' said John de la Havre softly, leaning towards Barbara with a significant glance that reminded her of his retort to the impertinence with which she had attacked him the first time she met him at the Club. And in his own mind, he said to himself what he could not voice to the company: 'Yes, why not let the natives run their own show? It is their country. And we have really no right in it.'

'It is such a poor life for Mother, Daddy,' babbled Barbara, excited into childishness and mischief, because she felt aware of the presence of the men around her and was naturally impelled to make a butt of the only other woman, even though the woman was her mother. 'So far away from dances and shows. And Mother has no friends to talk to.'

'Yes, dear, that's what I am always saying,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, too busy pouring tea to notice her daughter's malice. 'It is so hot here. And there is no company for you. At your age it is not nice for a white girl to be alone among these thousands of coolies. And you go gadavering about all on your own, without even taking the sayce. There are all kinds of budmashes among these men.....Tea, John?'

'Yes, thanks, Mrs. Croft-Cooke,' said de la Havre, and contemplating the cup in his hand, he smiled at Barbara and leaning towards her, murmured the phrase he had found the other day to describe the contents of a cup of tea: 'The hunger, the sweat and the despair of a million Indians!'

'Come, come, John,' said Barbara loudly, looking winsomely at de la Havre, with the starlight of her eyes. 'None of your Bolshie notions. Father is already angry with you about me. You will get the sack if you don't behave.'

'What did he say?' inquired Mrs. Croft-Cooke, but before waiting for an answer she asked: 'Will you have tea or a peg?'

'A peg, please, Mrs. Croft-Cooke,' said Reggie.

'Same for me,' said Charles Croft-Cooke.

'Lie Box, bring two pegs for the sahibs,' called Mrs. Croft-Cooke. 'But—there is no soda and no ice..... Oh, now, Charles. I don't know you can drink whisky without soda and ice in this heat. Really.'

'Why? Hasn't the ice come from the plains to-day?' asked Croft-Cooke.

'No,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke. 'Or, at least, the sayce hasn't fetched it if it has arrived at the office. These servants! That Lie Box has been swindling me on vegetables for days. I went to the bazar last Saturday and found that artichokes are sold at an anna a seer.'

'And what did he say the rate was?' asked de la Havre with a mischievous twinkle.

'Two annas! Just fancy! Doubling it! The natives are born liars!'

'Never mind, Mother,' said Barbara, who had not

very pronounced views about the natives, since she had emerged only a year ago from a secondary school, and had spent most of her life with an aunt in Dulwich. 'He is an old dear. Do you know he taught me to make an omelette this morning? And he said: "Miss Sahib, I cook you to teach lesson!" Don't you think that was sweet?'

'That's a good one,' said Reggie smiling. 'But I have got a book full of them called *Honoured Sir* by Babuji, I picked up at Thappar's when I was in Calcutta last month. Veritable gems. I must lend it to you ... Frightfully amusing.'

'It is their rotten education,' said de la Havre rather priggishly. 'Actually Indians are good at languages, you know. How many words of Hindustani can we speak apart from the swear words and the epithets?' He flushed to realize that he had not been able to repress himself from taking sides. These arguments served no good purpose, as experience had already shown him, and yet he could not let such blatancy pass unchallenged.

'But, John!' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke hastily, eager from sheer force of habit to head off any possible awkwardness, 'these natives are lazy. And we must not spoil them. They are born liars. And they steal. I caught a coolie woman plucking roses from our garden the other day, and I shooed her off. And they let their cows and buffaloes into the vegetable patch that Charles has planted at the back of the bungalow. We must not spoil them. ...'

She paused as Ilahi Bux came with a tray on which lay a bottle of White Horse, a jug of hot water and two glasses. When the servant had disappeared,

she resumed her narrative.

'Do you mean to tell me that Lie Box is the same as I? He has been demanding a rise in pay ever since he visited his son who is a Babu in Calcutta. He educated his son with the money he earned from us, and now that boy has made him discontented. And he gets tired so soon now, working. He is always tired. ...'

Charles Croft-Cooke frowned as he poured himself and Reggie Hunt whisky in the glasses. He did not like his wife to make such a fool of herself. Not that he did not share her sentiments, but she was so naive. He himself, through his long stay of twenty years in India, had learnt to take the pride of his Englishness for granted. Besides, he did not like talk, especially all this talk touching matters which were better left alone. All that he was concerned about was that everyone should do his job properly. He upheld the simple law that any coolie who worked hard was to be rewarded and any coolie who was lazy or made mischief was to be punished. And this was the principle which he sought to apply to his household, also. Efficiency, above all else. Latterly the agitation of the Congress wallahs, was finding echoes up in the plantations. And, in his soul, he felt a certain panic whenever he heard of a terrorist outrage in Calcutta. Not that he was conscious of the feeling of being isolated as one of a few white men among the coolies but all the same he was disturbed a little. But he had built up for himself a kind of prestige with his hard aloofness; and, adequately armed under his waistcoat with a steel plate, and a revolver in his pocket like some of the more impor-

tant of his countrymen, he really felt quite safe.

'But you get tired, too, Mother, in this heat,' mocked Barbara, with the pitiless persistence of youth.

'A French scientist,' said de la Havre, histrionically, affecting an air of mischief which took its cue from the hilarity of Barbara, 'has invented a serum, which is said to abolish fatigue. Dogs injected with this serum worked on a tread-mill for sixteen hours without undue weariness, and it is believed that the serum will add ten years to the life of a man. And he will be able to spend those ten years on the tread-mill, just like a dog, and without undue weariness. I should think it will be a good thing for your husband to order some, Mrs. Croft-Cooke. It will be useful for everyone, especially for the coolies.'

And saying this, he looked round for approval with an exaggerated flourish. But there was no response, and, slightly chagrined, he sat back with an obstinate smile to watch the general discomfort that his irony had produced.

'You and your bloody coolies ought all to be shot dead against a wall,' said Croft-Cooke, and laughed to cover his dislike of the sarcasm implicit in de la Havre's words.

'Charles! Charles! Don't swear, dear!', said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, too thick-skinned to realize the intent of de la Havre's words.

There was an awkward silence during which Croft-Cooke coloured a fine purple, and blew a mouthful of hot breath, Reggie gulped a mouthful of whisky. Mrs. Croft-Cooke looked from face to face, rather at a loss, and Barbara opened her vanity bag.

'Have you had any more results, John?' she asked

to change the conversation.

'No,' answered de la Havre loudly, to cover his embarrassment at the offence he realized he had caused Croft-Cooke, and riding on the crest of the false jollity that had emerged during the afternoon. He had found tea parties, and for that matter, all parties, difficult enough at 'home,' because people came and delicately made polite conversation, while with refined insincerity they suppressed all their real thoughts and feelings. And here in India, in remote Assam, the conventions of the drawing-room were more rigid than they were even in the plains, because most of the planters were hard-headed business men. At home they would probably have been successful grocers. Some of the younger ones were the 'difficult' sons of middle-class families, boys who might have been sent out farming to Australia, but were instead dispatched here in view of the better prospects afforded by the tea plantations, which were reputed to be some of the most organized agricultural industries in the world. Encouraged by a doting mother, de la Havre had been an *enfant terrible*. He had learnt later to be an exhibitionist in order to cope with the awkward contingencies that arose at tea parties, and, mixing cleverness and superficiality with a certain amount of sincerity, he had always got away with it. But in the planter's colony, he felt like a fish out of water, and beyond earning Barbara's admiration and the Burra Sahib's irritation, most of his academisms and theoretical jokes fell completely flat.

'Why not?' Barbara insisted, more to cover up the lull in the conversation than for anything else.

'My microscope is rusted with the sweat of my brow', he said, 'and the only lens I had has been broken by the concentrated intensity of my glance. I must order another from Germany.'

'Why not from home?' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke.

'Because British goods are not always the best', said de la Havre, now quite impudent and bumptious in spite of himself.

Croft-Cooke took this depreciation quite seriously and turned his face away in disgust. He would have made an excuse and got up, but that his glass lay half full in his hand. Reggie lifted his chin towards Croft-Cooke, and made a slight clucking noise with his tongue. But he bottled up his rage with the strength that the silent agreement with his boss gave him. Mrs. Croft-Cooke got up and expressed her fury by pulling the cord for Ilahi Bux to come and clear the table. Barbara hung her head down, not knowing what to do to quieten de la Havre, and prevent him from annoying her father. She knew that their hostility would only recoil back on her.

Spurred on by his phrase as much as by the increased tension he had created, de la Havre was meditating another quip, howsoever cheap, something in the nature of, 'Barbara likes French preparations, I like things made in Germany,' but he became conscious of his *naivete*, and only said in justification of his remark, 'The Teutons are experts in the matter of microscopes, because they are more conscious of the existence of microbes.'

The justification appeased nobody. And now, isolated from the rest of the company, he sought to fill up the awkward gap by looking for another more

harmless phrase. He could not think of anything sufficiently interesting and innocuous. So he went on to another of his academisms in a rapid monologue.

'A scientist said the other day that man has still to fight for his place in the universe; if he fails in the fight, he will be exterminated, like the mammoths and the dinosaurs before him, by that race of smaller beings, the microbes. And the worst that our race has to fear is defeat and extermination, the best that it has to hope for is to become a stepping-stone on the road to higher and more cultured human beings.'

Another moment of silence prevailed.

It was on the tip of Reggie's tongue to say 'I am fed up with all this morbid stuff,' but he managed to restrain himself and asked 'What about a spot of tennis?'

'It is sweltering hot!' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke.

'Besides, isn't the court under water, Mother?' interposed Barbara.

'I will go down and inspect the new coolies, who have arrived,' said Reggie in a rather hurt voice. 'Cheerio, everybody.'

The farewell was awkward, much more so Reggie Hunt's exit, even though Mrs. Croft-Cooke lifted her voice to say 'Good-bye,' and Croft-Cooke put in: 'See if the packets have left the go-down, Reggie, there's a good boy.'

'Talking of the new coolies,' said de la Havre, 'have you heard from the company about my scheme for the wells?' There was another prolonged silence during which he realized afresh how wide the gulf had become between him and all the burra sahibs since he had resigned from the I.M.S. last year, and

how sharp and dogmatic he had become in defending his attitude to the presumptions of the planters.

'Well. yes', replied Croft-Cooke slowly but earnestly, with a kind, almost apologetic smile, since he had approved of the plan himself when de la Havre put it before him. 'I am afraid they won't sanction the grant.'

'Oh,' said de la Havre, losing colour.

And, for a moment, he was dumb with indignation. Then, feeling that he had outraged Croft-Cooke enough during the afternoon, and that whatever the Burra Sahib's faults, he had encouraged him, recommended his plan, and was obviously sincerely sorry about the company's reply, he controlled his impatience, and said: 'I am sorry... I had put a lot of work into the investigations, and... if only the company realized how dangerous those wells are...'

'You see,' said Croft-Cooke, twisting his face into a sympathetic grimace, 'the company probably feels that with things becoming more difficult we don't know how long we will be here. And the slump is affecting this business with all the rest. If we began to do all that the extremists in the Royal Commission of Labour complained about, we would be at a standstill. You know as I do.... These coolies are sub-human, and do not altogether value the benefits of hygiene....'

He shifted a little uneasily under the steady glance of de la Havre.

'Since I have been here,' he continued, 'I have never known a coolie noted for bringing up children, for instance, and at one time mortality was appalling. But still they swarm. You see, millions of

them live to till the soil in their own homes and their net earning in their native land is a miserable pittance of three farthings a day, while in times of famine, wages vanish. Now you can't say that they are not better off here. They come here and increase their earnings tenfold, and may return to become landowners and capitalists themselves, one day, in their districts.'

De la Havre wondered once again whether the Burra Sahib sincerely believed what he said. It appeared so from his tone. The doctor had resisted Anglo-India's belief in British greatness ever since his arrival in this country. At first, perhaps, it had been from an instinct to be different from everyone else, an individual. Then he had given up the Imperial Medical Service, because the sentimental romantic in him wanted to make a brave gesture to convince himself that he had really come to regard Indians as human beings and to believe that they had a right not only to rule themselves, but to rule themselves justly by destroying the inequalities of caste and class and creed. And Cooke's argument seemed fantastic. But he modulated what would have been an impatient outburst to a tone both deferential and conciliatory.

'I can't say that I understand the company's point of view, Mr. Croft-Cooke,' he said. 'I am sorry, and . . . perhaps you will think . . . I am vague and humanitarian . . . but I see it as a doctor. I know that thousands of these coolies may be swept off by the parasites in those wells. And I feel conscience-stricken. It would be criminal not to do anything about it since I know the water supply is infected. And con-

sidering the company earns millions of pounds every year on their labour, it wouldn't be such a terrible loss for it to spend a lakh to save the coolies from perishing through gnats and pests....'

'Well,' said Croft-Cooke, putting forward his hand to say good-bye to de la Havre since the tea party had become rather protracted and he had the accounts to check and send the dispatch by the evening mail to Calcutta. 'I will do all I can to put this matter again before the directors.'

'Thanks if you would,' said de la Havre. 'Because I feel that....' He felt futile and could not express himself.

'Yes, yes,' said Croft-Cooke politely. 'I understand, and I will do all I can.'

De la Havre shifted on his feet and looked towards Barbara, straining himself to find some polite way of explaining that Croft-Cooke did not understand. How could he understand, as he stood there, hard and wooden? How could he understand when he stood hedged behind the stern rock of prejudice, fixed firmly in the opinion that, as compared with their masters, the Indians were shocking barbarians in point of intellect and civilization, while the coolies were sub-human creatures, contemptible and bare? How could he understand, when he believed that, compared with the life he led in his village, the peasant was far superior as a slave on the plantation? He looked up to Croft-Cooke. The manager was waiting for him to say something, so that the farewell should not be sullen. But de la Havre did not speak. He was still obsessed with his thoughts.

It was not only Croft-Cooke who could not under-

stand. Almost all Englishmen in India believed, with varying degrees of individual emphasis, that the Indians could not rule themselves. There were only a few exceptions, black sheep like himself, who seemed perverse and out of place in this country. Why, he recalled, even Tweetie, one of the most intelligent men in this colony, thought that de la Havre exaggerated. Tweetie, it was true, was a man of few words, and he always gave de la Havre a patient and uninterrupted hearing, but from his occasional grunts, and his slightly sceptical smile as he knocked out his pipe at the end of the tirade, his thoughts were fairly obvious. And one evening at the Club, he had voiced his opinion at some length. 'You know,' he had said, 'after all, the coolie is favoured here to some extent. We respect his customs and conventions. He is housed and fed. He can keep goats and fowls. His tastes are simple, and he is probably not unhappy. His ideas are few, his vocabulary small and limited. He may be oppressed, no one, in truth, could deny that, I suppose, but he doesn't feel it as we should. You must remember that.' And he had buried himself once more in his chair, and fumbled for his tobacco pouch.

The incident flashed through de la Havre's mind, and for a moment it seemed to illuminate everything. And he wondered if he really did exaggerate. He turned towards the steps.

'Good-bye, Mrs. Croft-Cooke. Good-bye,' de la Havre said, and proceeded to go.

'Good-bye, John,' smiled Mrs. Croft-Cooke, lifting her head from Margaret Peterson's *Love in the Sahara*, which she had taken up where she had left

it in the afternoon, when the men had started their discussion.

‘Wait for me, John,’ said Barbara, who had disappeared for a while. ‘I am coming for a walk, too.’

‘I thought you were going out riding, Barbara dear,’ said Mrs. Croft-Cooke. ‘And I have ordered the sayce to get your horse ready for you—especially as the sayce is so slack....’

‘I won’t be long, Mother,’ said Barbara, and walked out after de la Havre.

Croft-Cooke had no time to waste on conducting Barbara’s life for her, beyond occasionally expressing a faint grunt of disapproval, so he did not stop to hear his wife’s remarks, but poured himself out another stiff whisky, and repaired to his miniature office, by the veranda. And, being a man of business, with a certain amount of whisky in his head, he forgot all about de la Havre’s memorandum on cholera, attending to the hard facts of £ s. d.

3

SAJANI felt very excited at the sight of the little brick huts in the coolie lines covered with corrugated iron roofs, which glittered in the pale afternoon sunshine. And she could not contain herself when Buta led the family to one of the houses at the extremest end of a row in the basin of the valley.

'It is almost like the house of the lawyer of our village,' she said.

Gangu who had built his own mud hut in the village, and who knew something of the laws of architecture as they apply to the Indian climate felt that this tin box was not so desirable, as it would be too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. He was not so easily taken in by appearances, and he was not bluffed by the primness of the huts.

'Now did you ever dream you would ever live in a *pukka kothi*?' said Buta. 'We rustics from the villages have no sense. Look what the angrezi log can do even in building houses for humble folk.'

But, as Gangu entered the place behind his fluttering excited wife, he was confirmed in his misgivings, for the narrow little place, back to back with another hut presumably of the same size, was like a furnace with the heat radiated by the tin roof. He looked round the room, probing the corners where columns of darkness washed the light, and he had a feeling

of being closed in by the hard, impenetrable walls, a feeling that he had never experienced surrounded by the soft clay of his village hut even when it was choked by smoke. And, at the same time, he felt like a towering pillar standing in the middle of the room. But he tried to buoy up his timid soul by suggesting to himself wisely that they would soon get used to it.

'We will have the oven there, and there, in that corner, we shall have the pitchers of water,' said Sajani, excited and already planning the space of her new home. 'Come ni, Leila, come vay, Buddhu,' she shouted to the children who had strayed outside, 'fetch me a couple of bricks and some mud.'

'Be patient, the mother of my daughter,' said Gangu. 'Let us rest a moment, before we begin to build ovens and allot all the space to pitchers. That corner ought to be kept for sleeping, anyhow. But by and by we will see to that.'

'Yes, yes, you rest now,' said Buta. 'I must be off too. But I will call Narain, your neighbour, in the hut at the back.' And he bawled 'Narain' till the tin roof echoed back his shout.

'Yes, Sardar,' came an old man's call.

'Acha, then, I will tell the chowkidar brother to look after you,' said Buta. 'He keeps watch over the *basti*, lest your valuables be stolen. And Narain, there, will tell you everything. Now, my family will be waiting.'

And he joined hands in obeisance to Gangu, either because the instinct of his original low caste prevailed, or because he had a slight conscience about his guilt in enticing the family away with false pro-

mises. Then he left.

'Acha, Buta Ram, *mehrbani*,' said Gangu, and relieving his back of the weight of the bundle of family goods and chattels, he breathed a sigh of relief and sat down.

'I will sweep the room and treat the floor with cowdung if you get up,' said Sajani, with the immaculate instinct of the fastidious village woman whose whole life had been spent cleaning and washing and cooking, and cleaning again.

'Oh, sit down and rest awhile, the mother of Leila!' said Gangu, slightly irritated, and looking out of the low door at Buta's form hurrying past groups of coolies, by the dusty pathway on each side of which stood the huts now beating back the last rays of the sun like burnished shields. He got up from where he had collapsed into a heap and emerged from the room. The coolies in various groups in the lines seemed strange to him, at once fascinating and repulsive. And he wondered whether behind their little dark bodies they were like Buta and the Babu at the offices, slippery and selfish.

'Ram, Ram, brother, said Narain, an emaciated little man, as he came up with a hookah in his hand, bare except for a loin-cloth.

'Ram, Ram,' said Gangu with a smile.

'Have you come from afar?' asked Narain.

'A distance of three days and three nights,' said Gangu. 'We be from the district of Hoshiarpur.'

'You be Punjabis, then?'

'Yes, hillmen,' answered Gangu. 'And where do you come from?'

'I be from Bikaner, brother,' said Narain, dole-

fully.

'When did you come here, then?' asked Gangu.

'Oh, a long time ago, brother, a long time,' said Narain, and he puffed at his hookah as if to swallow his spittle, and then continued in a choking voice, 'About twelve years.'

'Did a sardar bring you here?'

'Yes, all the coolies here are brought by the agents of the planters. Not one would come here of his free choice. What curse upon your fate has brought you?'

'You are not happy here, then?' said Gangu, concernedly.

'Oh, it is all right, brother,' said Narain. 'I suppose it was in our kismet. But at home it was like a prison and here it is slightly worse. There was a famine in the Bikaner state, because they said the Maharajah had given a lot of money to the Sarkar and had none left for opening canals. My two elder children died of that famine, and my wife and I nearly died too. Then a sardar met us and brought us here. And it is better than it was in the famine, because we eat a little food here every day, and I have two more children besides that Baloo there, who was in arms when we came. Our contract was only for three years, but we couldn't go back at the end of that time. I am in debt to the bania in the village, for one can't earn enough these days: in the old days it was better because the sahibs had good trade and they paid better wages. It is twelve years since we saw our relations, and I don't know whether they are dead or alive. And I don't know what has become of my land. I hear the Maharajah has opened

a canal after all, and I would have liked to till my old fields again and spend my last days among my kith and kin. But that does not seem to be in my kismet. What brought you here?’

‘The belly,’ said Gangu, resignedly.

‘Have you signed the contract then, brother?’ asked Narain.

‘No, not yet,’ said Gangu.

‘Well, you can’t escape from here now, anyhow,’ commented Narain. ‘You can never go back.’

‘No,’ said Gangu quickly, as if instinctively he had known the truth, and accepted his fate. And yet he was half curious and asked: ‘Why not?’

‘You will soon know, brother,’ said Narain. ‘First water, afterwards mire! This prison has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail. The chowkidars keep guard over the plantation, and they bring you back if you should go. The other day the chowkidar beat Balkrishnan, the boy who fled to the Santal village, because he thought he could escape to his mother in Oudh. The chowkidars go round at night with a lamp and open every door to see if we are all at home. There used to be a roll call every night before I came.’

‘But Buta did not tell me about that, brother,’ said Gangu, indignant at the suggestion that there should be a watch kept over his movements, though inside himself, he had broken his will to prepare it in readiness to accept all kinds of humiliations. And he hardened his face into a knot of anguish which was seldom to be untied again.

‘It is all right, brother, everything is all right,’ said Narain, in the conventional manner of offering sym-

pathy and hope to the dejected, as he realized that he had frightened the newcomer unduly. Then, after a pause, he began again 'As I say, one gets food here at least, and one might have died of famine in the state of Bikaner. I saw three of my brothers die before my eyes, and two sons. I and Shama had nothing to eat for a month, except leaves, and this Baloo nearly died because there was no milk in Shama's breast. Now he has grown up, and that's a consolation.' And he swallowed the saliva of tenderness that had arisen in his mouth.

Gangu looked at his children absorbed in play with Narain's son and he too felt relieved to some extent.

'Oh, Baloo!' Narain called suddenly. 'Run along and tell your mother to prepare food for the guests. And then he turned to Gangu and said: 'You will all have your meal with us to-night.

'Oh, don't trouble, brother,' said Gangu, slightly prejudiced against Narain, because, in his mind, the Bikaneris were all associated with low, ugly paupers and street beggars, and he still felt the pride of the once well-to-do peasant in his bones.

'It is no trouble, brother,' said Narain. 'We have called each other brothers, and we will live next to each other as brothers.'

'You are kind, but there are so many of us,' said Gangu. 'It will be too much trouble for the owner of your house. Besides, we have some sweet cakes left over and we will eat those and sleep.'

'No, no, it is no trouble,' insisted Narain with the characteristic feudal hospitality that had died so hard in spite of the new 'give me your eyes and you

grobe about' that has come in with the new economic order.

'Acha, brother,' agreed Gangu. And he called first to his daughter and then to his wife: 'Leila, go my child and help your aunt to cook! The mother of Leila, perhaps you will go and meet your sister, too.'

'Yes, come child, come sister,' said Narain. 'I will show you where Baloo's mother is.'

Both Leila and Sajani followed Narain to the back of their hut. Buddhu attached himself to the end of his sister's apron, with Baloo's fluffy coloured woollen ball in his hand.

Gangu looked out to the valley where the sunlight played on the shallow ledges and the rows of the tea plants, painting them yellow and bright red and indigoblue in turn. What a rich harvest of crop it was, he thought. And, as a slight breeze swayed the leaves gently, he thought of the graceful stalks of wheat in his own fields when the rains had been frequent and the harvest good. He could see himself in his mind's eye, the merest speck of dust in a vast field, struggling through the crop homewards towards Sajani at the end of the day, smiling with the assurance that all was well with him and the world, with him and with her. But it all seemed a long time ago, when he had married and still had five acres. And now he wondered whether life was really going to be so terrible as Narain said it was on this plantation which the twilight had transmuted into a golden garden. He stared blankly for a moment, the thoughts in his head crowded out by the fatigue of the journey that crept into him now like an insidious poison, drugging his body into an utter apathy and torpor

more resigned than resignation.

But, suddenly there was a noise, for Baloo came shouting: 'Sahib!—Father!'

Gangu sat up and craned his head to look on all sides.

'Hunt Sahib, the Ashashtant planter Sahib,' announced Narain, coming up to Gangu, and then automatically he turned and took his hands to his forehead to salaam.

'Salaam, Huzoor,' said Gangu, raising his hand to his brow.

'You new coolie?' asked Hunt in broken Hindustani, his head moving as if he were shivering with fever.

'Yes, Huzoor,' said Gangu.

'Who brought you here? Buta Sardar?'

'Yes, Huzoor,' said Gangu.

'Where is he?' asked Hunt, staring at Gangu.

Gangu shook his head to signify that he did not know.

'Why didn't he report to me that he is here?' said Hunt, now looking anywhere but at Gangu.

'Huzoor, he has gone home,' put in Narain.

Hunt explored the neighbourhood. He scowled, veered round and made to go.

'Father,' called Leila, running up towards Gangu, without knowing that a sahib was there. 'Food is re——' But as she saw the form of the white man, she leaped back and showed her heels in a frantic rush for shelter.

'Who is she?' asked Hunt, turning to Narain.

'My daughter, Sahib,' said Gangu.

'Why does she run?' he said. 'Call her here.'

'She is only a little child, Huzoor,' said Narain before Gangu could answer. 'That is Buta.'

'Acha,' said Hunt, and walked away towards the Sardar, followed by a crowd of curious, big-eyed urchins.

'Bless your fate, brother,' said Narain to Gangu. 'He is a very *budmash* sahib. He is always drunk. And he has no consideration for anyone's mother or sister. He is openly living with three coolie women!'

'Why, but my daughter is a child,' Gangu said. 'He couldn't have said anything to her.'

'Nobody knows what may or may not happen here, brother,' said Narain. 'Nobody's mother or sister is safe in this place. But come and let us have the food, and then you must rest, for you must be tired after your long journey.' And he led Gangu off.

'ANY special orders, sir, this morning?' said Reggie Hunt, coming briskly into Croft-Cooke's room at the office.

The Burra Sahib was buried deep in his files and did not look up immediately, but murmured something unintelligible. Then, lifting his head, smiling, and stiffening his neck, he said: 'Good morning, Reggie.' And he began to toy with the various pipes that lay in a tray on the right hand side of his great table, as if to give himself time to think, to make up his mind about some knotty problem.

'Nothing special, no,' he said, after due deliberation. 'I think I will go down on the elephant to-day and meet the train for the treasury. You needn't worry. Only I would like an extra warder. Who can you ask?'

'Buta has come back from the plains yesterday, said Reggie, 'though he didn't report to me on arrival. He should be on clearing duty. He has brought only one old coolie back, with a family of three.'

'Yes, he'll do,' said Croft-Cooke, after a momentary pause. 'I don't think we need worry about the recruiting. It will improve as this nationalist trouble blows over. Is the family billeted?'

'Yes, sir. That was all attended to last night.'

'All right,' said Croft-Cooke. And then, as an after-

thought he looked at his watch. It was 9-30. And his face contracted a little with disapproval.

Reggie was quick to notice that. He knew that there was a reproach in the Burra Sahib's face. Croft-Cooke himself was exact to the minute. And with a subdued 'Good morning, sir,' Reggie left the room.

Outside, Tipoo stood, tall and comely, biting her bit and rolling her eyes as she scanned the red coat of Hamir Singh, who was wearing the office orderly uniform.

Reggie took the reins from Hamir Singh, and mounted the mare. And in a second, he was riding his high horse across the plantation to the strip of forest which was being cleared by the coolies, to bring another hundred acres of land into cultivation with the fifteen hundred that already stood teeming with a plentiful harvest.

Ordinarily he was full of the pride of the white man engaged in pioneering. The white heat of a strange bodily passion would well up in him as he rode about, a strange, inexplicable glow of pure physical health, in his biceps, in his triceps, in his rump, in his thighs and in his gaitered shins. He would feel strong and then he wanted to be noticed and admired. He was involved in an ecstasy of sheer power. But some mornings, he was slightly late getting to the office, and Croft-Cooke's glare reprimanded him. That damped his pride a little. And, of course, the sweat was always troublesome in this muzzy heat, as it poured down his body.

He was relieved by the thought that he would not have to go riding that volcanic rock of an elephant

in the afternoon, to get the pay-chest, for however great it might look to be seated in a howdah, the ten miles' journey ruined your digestion for a week, and, as a white man, you had to control yourself from being sick before the coolies.

Tipoo, the mare, described a circle as the shadow of a group of firs fell upon her.

Reggie dug his heels into her sides and pulled the reins hard till the mare reared aloft. She had got into the habit of doing that. He remembered that the first time she had done it, he had been dead scared that he would fall. But the mare always went forward after a little mischief, frothing at the mouth and biting at her bit. And Reggie liked to imagine that he looked like Napoleon Bonaparte, as the Emperor had led his armies across the Swiss mountains, or at least, as the renowned hero figured in the picture reproduced in the school history book. The analogy invariably seemed to gather force as Tipoo fell into a trot and Reggie saw the coolies clearing the undergrowth before him. He would swing his whip in the air, and startle the horse into galloping again as if he were going to storm a fortress. And he felt he would love to come up to the coolies in the posture in which Napoleon must have come up to his men, towering like a giant over the pigmies, and infuse them with an awe and respect for him. This childish fantasy had recurred again and again when he first came here, until now he could summon it from his sub-conscious and act it whenever he liked. And he often did that, because emotionally and intellectually, at twenty-two, he was still very much the schoolboy from Tonbridge, even though he had

held a commission in the army and was now an assistant planter on one of the biggest tea estates in Assam.

The corner of the plantation where the coolies worked stood on the steep slopes above the Manager's bungalow. Tipoo panted and puffed as she threw her brave white head forward towards the hillside. But she could not gallop and slowed down. Reggie spurred her on fiercely and whipped her on the back. The horse grazed her knees against the roots of a tree and almost fell. A sharp ray of common sense illuminated Reggie's brain for a moment, and he saved himself from appearing ridiculous by pulling up his reins and advancing towards his men without simulating Napoleon Bonaparte.

'Salaam, Huzoor,' greeted Buta, the Sardar, who stood spade in hand, goading the coolies to work.

Two coolies nearby noticed the Sahib's arrival and meekly raised their hands to their greasy, sweat-covered faces; the rest hacked and slashed for all they were worth at the undergrowth of shrubs, saplings, suckers, bushes and creepers.

The wild swing of their axes, the sharp sweep of their scythes and the clean cut of their knives filled Reggie with a belligerent passion for destruction. He alighted from his horse wishing he were wielding an axe. But the dignity of the white man would be at stake if he were to do the coolies' job except for a joke, unless it involved manipulating a tractor.

'Buta,' Reggie said in broken Hindustani, 'why did you not report to me on arrival yesterday?'

'Huzoor,' said Buta and stood still, bowing abjectly.

'You go on special duty to fetch treasure with the Burra Sahib

'*Bachho, Sahib!* said a coolie, panic-stricken. And he groped forward beneath a load of undergrowth which the other coolies had cleared, and which he wanted to throw down a ravine twenty yards away from where Reggie stood.

'Shoop!' Reggie struck him on the shins with his whip and shouted: 'Why don't you take another way, fool? Can't you see that I am talking to the Sardar!'

The man fell as he lost the momentum of the weight on his head and groaned: 'I could not see, Huzoor, the creepers covered my face'. And even as he said so, he made an effort to salaam the Sahib.

Gangu, who was specially in the charge of Buta, and near the scene of the accident, felt the blood tingling in his veins.

The sweating, black bodies of the coolies came to a standstill. They thought that one of their comrades had struck an axe at his own feet, or cut away his fingers, mistaking them for grass, as often happened. But they saw, 'Raja Sahib,' as they called Reggie, and they knew that he had flogged a coolie, which was also a common occurrence since this Sahib had come. They averted their eyes and were about to bend down after the breather.

'Get down to your work! On with it!' shouted Reggie. 'Get down to it!' And he walked up among them, impatiently.

The labourers bent to their work quickly, nervously, rolling their eyes surreptitiously to see on whom the wrath of the 'Raja Sahib' was falling. The din of

their war against nature engulfed their consciousness, however, and they could only see the vegetation yielding to their steel.

'Make them work systematically, and don't let them stray too far from each other,' said Reggie to Buta. 'And report at the office to the Burra Sahib in the afternoon.'

Then he mounted his horse and rode off dramatically.

They could be supervised better if they were concentrated in one spot. That was one of the many theories Reggie had evolved. They were congenitally lazy and needed constant goading. You had to be strong with them, for they respected you if you showed them that you were not a weakling! That was another of Reggie's theories. And, unlike most people who merely believed in their pet ideas, Reggie acted on his. He suddenly recalled that he had not weighed himself recently. The scales had shown his weight, stripped, to be two hundred and four pounds, last year, and his skin had been tanned a rich olive since early spring.

'I am not feeling so well,' he thought, but he did not stop to ask why. Instead, he tried to assure himself that he must be quite fit really, because he had lifted a wooden dumb-bell of three hundred pounds with his wrist, to impress the coolies in the lines on the previous day. He had had no polo, though, recently. And he must do some more shooting. Must ask old Croft-Cooke to arrange a hunt. Meanwhile, this was exercise enough riding up and down the plantation, directing the work and lending a strong hand.

Only this heat! He felt the suffocating stillness of the atmosphere, humid and hot, white and unbroken, save by the thud, thud of the mare's hoofs. He reined in his horse as he was now reaching the edge of the tea garden where the women were busy plucking, and he took out a large silk handkerchief to wipe his face and neck. He felt a warm breeze go rustling through the tea-bushes, and blow the holes on the top of his helmet.

'Salaam, Huzoor,' said Neogi, the Gurkha Sardar, who stood watching the women and children at work, with a set, impassive face, whose grimness was accentuated by high cheek-bones and narrow, blood-shot eyes.

The coolie women shuffled like hens at the arrival of a much-dreaded cock.

'Salaam,' said Reggie Hunt, rather exhilarated. He thought the fluttering of the women and their furtive glances betokened admiration for his person, which indeed it did among some of them, though more because he was a sahib than because he was Reggie Hunt. And, as if in recompense for this popularity, he relaxed the willed extroversion of the dominant white man to a casual even temper.

'Why didn't that coolie on the clearing see me?' he said to himself, in admonition, for he was half-sorry now, that he had beaten the man. Apart from the youthful exuberance that had exalted the bluff of the white man into naive theories, he had a susceptible side, buried under layer upon layer of the superciliousness, the complacency and the assurance of the spirit that built the Empire—of which, like his malaria, he had early caught the contagion. 'He

annoyed me by taking me unawares,' he told himself, and beamed with condescension as if he had already forgotten the time when he had swelled with pugnacity and rage.

'Mind the plucking there, it is getting coarse,' Neogi shouted, running with staff upraised to a row where some coolie women had started giggling.

The little hands clipped the leaves more eagerly and more nervously, two leaves and a bud, two leaves and a bud.

'Keep the tops of your bushes level,' said Reggie, with an ostentatious bravado. He was wondering for a minute what he could do in order to arrive at a contact with one of the women.

The coolie women bent to their plucking with fear in their hearts and a queer confusion in their heads.

'The women workers are more efficient,' Reggie assured himself, quite insensitive to the undercurrents of emotion he had let loose in their souls. He favoured them almost involuntarily, hoping to establish a relationship of informal intimacy to facilitate the next stage of union with one of them, especially as he felt a strange stirring in his loins which the saddle encouraged.

'How many baskets have been taken to the factory?', he inquired briskly, surcharged with the glow of that warmth which he felt rising in him. He wanted to linger about in the dizzy atmosphere, though Tipoo, knowing that the next station of call was the leaf house, dug her front paws into the ground and pulled at her bit.

'Two hundred and ten, Huzoor,' answered the Sardar. 'And some more to go.'

'Let me see,' mumbled Reggie to himself, looking anywhere but at the Sardar. 'That makes five hundred pounds for the acre.'

And then spotting a fair-complexioned, flat-nosed Gurkha woman, working at the end of the row, he said: 'Is that your wife, Neogi?'

'Yes, Huzoor,' replied the Sardar.

'Hum,' commented Reggie, not knowing what to say next. And he smiled at Neogi, as if to compliment him on possessing such a nice bit of goods. He was eager to see what effect his query had on the warder, but Neogi turned his face away. So Reggie could regard with impunity the balanced form of the woman inclining gracefully over the bushes as her hands stripped the white waxy camelia, the young leaves and flushes, and threw them over her shoulder into the long basket slung from a band on her forehead to her back. His eyes were caught by her arse, and he caressed the hind part of her body with an impudent stare. But then he became conscious of some whispering among the women, and he scanned the various groups.

'Leila, why doesn't that sahib go? I hope he doesn't keep watch on us all day,' Sajani whispered anxiously to her daughter, who worked next to her in a row, not far away from where Reggie stood. 'I am very nervous of him. Isn't he the angrez who came to our hut yesterday?'

'Mother, you are silly,' said Leila, who was thrilled like a child to see a white man on the spot where she worked. 'Attend to your work,' she added. 'You haven't even learnt that. You must get two leaves and a bud, two leaves and bud.'

'They say we will have to pluck nine months of the year,' said Sajani, absorbed in herself again. 'Nine months of the year, nine.'

'Mind your plucking there! Mind your plucking there! No talking!' shouted Neogi, to show the Sahib that he was alert though he too felt rather confused and disturbed.

Reggie turned again towards the warder. He noticed that Neogi's set, impassive face was flushed.

'Salaam, Neogi,' he said abruptly, and he pulled Tipoo's bridle and urged her forward.

The mare began to rush away and fell into a gallop on the pathway, rather encouraged by the sound of Neogi's farewell curses which followed her.

But Reggie was too struck with the beauty of Neogi's wife to pay any heed to the warder. And as he felt the heat of the sun on his pith helmet and thought of her face, his own face was flushed with the blood that the trampled affection in his heart seemed to shed. But, as he rode along through the rich silence of the plantation, lulled by the insidious whispers of his desire, other factors loomed more immediately on his horizon.

Croft-Cooke was such a nuisance, always harping on about preserving the prestige of the white man on the estates. 'Discipline, my boy, discipline, we must keep discipline!' He was always rubbing it in, directly or indirectly. It would be a damn good show when he retired, the bald-headed little bastard, Reggie thought vehemently. He was so mean. He had stuck for twentyfive years on the plantation, and must have put by a tidy bit of money on the quiet! Still he did not show any inclination to retire.

As Reggie pondered his grievances, while he cantered over the rough path, he recalled how he had been quite taken in by Croft-Cooke on his arrival. The Burra Sahib had been on his own then, and Reggie had felt a certain admiration for the old man. But when his own first strangeness wore off, after a few days, he had often felt like kicking the table at meals, and cursing his superior, so vigilantly did he watch every mouthful Reggie ate, and so impatient was he at lunch to call the khansamah to clear the table before the meal was halffinished. And then, in the evenings, when he relaxed from the pressure of work, he would meander on interminably, warning the newcomer about this and that, until Reggie could scarcely contain his exasperation. But he had felt sorry for the old man, when he had bouts of malaria. He looked ill and feeble after the fever. And Reggie knew the poor fellow never really enjoyed himself. That old cow of a wife of his would not let him, Reggie thought with a sneer. There was no love lost between Mrs. Croft-Cooke and the assistant planter. She was a hypocrite, he thought, disapproving of him because he drank too much and saying she wouldn't trust Barbara near him. Miserable old wretch, and yet she was the laughing stock of the Club, making a bee-line for Hitchcock anywhere she saw him. Hitchcock had told him that Croft-Cooke had once suggested that Hitchcock should exchange his job with Hunt. 'That must have been her doing,' Reggie reflected resentfully. And the old man was not only going to take it lying down, but actually pimp for her. He had no guts left. He was wasted. And it was time he cleared out.

'I am just the man to run this show' Reggie said to himself, throwing back his head and gripping the reins more militantly. And he was filled with a genuine self assurance. 'I shall be boss here,' he thought, as he slowly surveyed the green tea-bushes. And he rode along immersed in the pleasant vista of a rosy future.

The sun was almost overhead, and the heatwaves shimmered before his eyes.

'A long time before lunch,' he muttered. But he consoled himself with the thought that there would be a cup of tea to taste at the leaf house, or a drink. And, as Tipoo raced across the edge of the limitless rolling acres of vivid green, he lost himself once more in the vision of the life he would lead when he became head of the plantation.

But though he did not realize it, most of his ideas of management were derived from the advice old Croft-Cooke had given him when he first came out, and also, perhaps, from the perennial clichés which were paraded with such unfailing regularity at the Club, as the various members rose to an exalted pitch of ecstasy, when their tongues and imaginations were loosened by a couple of drinks. 'A lot of sedition about the place, you know. . . . The coolies must be kept down at a safe distance. . . . No truck with any hanky-panky tricks. . . . Specially those bloody Chatterjis and Bannerjis, inciting the coolies to riot and kicking up such a devil of a row in the Legislative Assembly. . . . What could they all be thinking about leaving such reckless bounders at large, to incite men to open murder? . . . Why didn't the Government put its foot down. . . .' And the orators would settle more

ponderously into their chairs and shake their heads gravely, before launching into another set of platitudes.

Excited by these echoes, Reggie Hunt had applied his mind to the problem, and had evolved a basic theory, which he had unfolded to his father in one of his first enthusiastic boyish letters. 'The white man is tolerated here because of his superior clothes, respected because of his knowledge, and admired for his personal qualities,' he had written in his pretentious screed. 'One can only control these people by strength, courage and determination. . . .' A large ink blot discharged from his over-eager pen had somewhat marred the general effect, but Reggie had scrawled on with unabated vigour. 'And, in spite of the weather, I am going to stick it, Dad, because it is the way to two thousand a year.'

That continually seemed to Reggie an alluring prospect, and he squared his shoulders, as if to face the glory that would be his. Only his thoughts were somewhat disturbed by the sweat pouring down his neck.

This was April heat. It would be worse in May. And it was hard work, this Kamjari! He would soon be roasting like a steak on a grill. And they would all be sitting peacefully at home, saying how sweet the Indian spring was. These bloody mosquitoes and flies! He hoped to God he wouldn't get malaria. That awful shivering last year. He had escaped it so far!

It was so close, he felt almost faint.

Bloody long hours! Half-past eight to one. Well, half-past nine, really, since he rarely got to the office till nine. But still, old Croft-Cooke always made it a point to remind him by looking disapprovingly at his

watch. Miserable old screw he was, not the slightest detail got past him ! But it would be twelve already, he consoled himself once more, as he saw some coolies going towards the factory with their baskets. God ! It would be like hell in the factory ! The machines rowing and the heat just pouring down from the tin roof !

‘Good old Tipoo!’ he said audibly. ‘Come along, let us have a little run!’ The mare snorted and whinnied, and slowed down to her master’s caressing voice as if she were deeply in love with him. But he dug his heels into her ribs, and shocked her into an awareness of his will. She flashed past the coolie women who proceeded in Indian file to the leaf-house, with baskets full of tea leaves.

‘Shun! Slope arms!’ the Gurkha warder at the gates of the factory ordered himself, and clicking his heels, presented arms to the Sahib.

Reggie saluted in the manner of his army days, and felt exhilarated to be in contact with that military feeling. Balwant Singh Thappa was the only efficient man in this disorganised world of filthy scum!

‘*Acha hai*,’ he said to the sepoy, for he had a good word for any sporting fighter, and he knew that the Gurkhas could use their khukhri and shoot their target as few other soldiers.

He alighted, handing the reins of his horse to the warder, and went into the clean, rough shed.

The pluckers were passing through the stiles at the weighing machines, in the large room where Tweetie stood, thick-set and dark, weighing the baskets, scrutinizing the measure with a steady stare and then recording in the log book.

'Funny chap! Ought to have been a commercial traveller rather than an engineer, with that round fat face of his,' Reggie thought as he approached Tweetie.

'Hallo, Reggie,' called Tweetie.

'Hallo,' said Hunt. 'How many thieves have you caught?'

'These Black velvet skins' said Tweetie, with a snort half of amusement, half of disgust, 'they are taking to deceiving you by putting moss-covered logs of wood at the bottoms of their baskets, instead of bricks. And one of them had put her baby into it. Almost choked him with leaves. When I found out and asked her why she did it, she said she had nowhere to put him while she was plucking. Crafty bitch!'

'Dock her pay altogether!' said Reggie sharply. 'And cut three annas off the pay of each one of the frauds. Dirty cheats, the whole bag of them. And not only here, too, the deceitful bitches. They try the same game in bed, leaving you high and dry at the critical moment.'

He sniggered, flushed a little, and then paused, searching for a further remark. This fellow said so little, and yet Hunt always sensed a slight contempt beneath the engineer's easy-going placidity.

'But tell me soney-boy,' he said, with forced jocularity.

'What?'

'Well, I've forgotten for a minute.'

'Then be good chap. Go and look at the withering shed and see if the salis are throwing the leaf in the proper place.'

'O.K., chief!' said Reggie, saluting ironically. And he departed through a door and up some steps to a

twostoried building with slated sides, steel-framed, iron-roofed, wooden-floored, where some hundreds of wirenetting shelves, a foot apart and a yard wide, mounted, row upon row, from floor to ceiling.

'Salaam, Huzoor,' greeted the Sardar, supervising some coolies, who were spreading the leaf which the women had left in the baskets thinly over the wire netting.

'Work going all right?' asked Reggie.

The supervisor took a handful of leaf and felt the soft, silky, easy touch which is the test of good withered leaf.

'Yes, Huzoor,' he said. And he proceeded to throw the leaf off the shelves into the receptacles in which it was to be taken to the rolling machine in the further part of the factory.

'Is the *Mistri* there?' Reggie asked the supervisor, pointing to the shed whence issued the awful clattering of the rolling machine.

'Yes, Huzoor,' said the supervisor.

'Ask him not to grind the leaf into powder or crush it,' said Reggie. 'Yesterday's packets were very inferior.'

'It is the first plucking, Huzoor,' said the supervisor, always with the same mechanical deference. 'The April plucking is always of an inferior quality, fresh and black. It will improve with the mid-summer plucking. And at the end of summer, it will be heavy.'

Reggie had no patience to go upstairs to the fermenting room where the leaf was spread out on the concrete floor. And as for the drying-room, the strong aroma of the black prepared tea was horribly repugnant. He decided to go and look at the packing-house,

and see that the sheet-lead lined wooden boxes were not being ruined by too many nails. The carpenter was an idiot and spent all his time making things for Mrs. Croft-Cooke. 'Thank goodness, there is no convoy of carts to go to-day, and old Croft-Cooke is going for the treasury. . . ' he reflected.

'All correct,' he reported to Tweetie. 'I must be off, old chap. My head is cracking with the heat.'

'You can have a drink if you wait till I've finished at the scale,' said Tweetie.

'No thanks,' Reggie replied. 'I think I'll be getting back.'

As he emerged from the factory, he saw that the sky, which he had left radiating a dull heat, was now black with gathering clouds. There was the portentous congestion of the humid atmosphere. He hurried instinctively.

When he got to where Balwant Singh Thappa held Tipoo, peal after peal of gurgling thunder reverberated from the sky, like the roaring of a pack of hungry lions, and as if frightening them, volleys of fireworks shot through the heavens. His bay mare shied.

He managed to untie the waterproof coat which was fixed to the end of the saddle, put it on in frantic haste, and mounted the animal.

There was a terrific sweep of the wind and large drops of rain fell down like hot tears from the sulky face of the sky.

He would have been wiser to have waited, but he was sure that he would be able to get back. He dug his heels into Tipoo's flanks and galloped off.

Before he had gone a hundred yards, however, the rain poured down as it can only pour in Assam. A

fifty-mile-an-hour gale faced him, and he could neither hear nor see anything in the storm. He ducked his head and braved the rain, shouting loudly, '*Koi hai? Koi hai? Koi hai?*' terrified lest he be swept into the ravine by the wind.

The thunder growled again, and his mare plunged into a field by a pathway which she knew to be a short cut to her master's house. There were such flashes of lightning that the whole valley appeared for a moment, a translucent, radiant golden-green. A rumble and a distant peal, then a piercing stroke, followed by a cracking noise, as if the heaven and earth had split into two, and he thought that the world was going to be annihilated, and he with it. But he tried to keep calm, and stared at the vast sheets of rain before him and the cataracts of water before his horse.

Groups of coolies were issuing out of their houses on the side of a field, bare-bodied except for little strips of cloth which covered their fore and aft. They had hoes on their shoulders and he knew they were going to clear the loose creepers and weeds that flowed down the hills into the garden.

'*Koi hai?*' he shouted again in despair, like a child crying for help.

The noise of the wind and the rain smothered his call.

But some of the coolies had seen him in difficulties, and they ran and led his horse up to his bungalow.

'Hell!' he cursed peevishly, when he got to the verandah. And then, as the fear of annihilation subsided, and he grew calmer, he lamented to himself that the climate which was so good for making money should be so uncomfortable to his person.

'Salaam, Sahib,' the coolies said, as they faced the tempest, their heads bent forward, as if to balance the hoes, and their feet struggling to get a foothold on the earth that slipped under them.

'Tiffin?' Reggie asked impatiently, still agitated and bad-tempered like a child, as he reached home.

'Please to change, Huzoor, and have a peg,' said Afzal. 'And tiffin will be ready.' And he came to where Reggie had sat down in a cane chair in the varandah and began to unlace the Sahib's boots.

For a moment Reggie struggled against the sense of comfort that Afzal always gave him, as if he resented the obligation he owed to this man, but then he accepted the service of the bearer, and rested back.

Between him and Afzal, there was an excellent relationship, based on a plain acceptance of the fact that he was the master and Afzal the servant. And since that was quite understood, he was exceedingly generous to the man, giving him plenty of bakshish, and even hats, boots and suits to wear on holidays, and brand new polo sticks, to play in the tea estates gymkhana. Of course for duty Afzal wore the long white coat and turban with a green band across it, which was the plantation bearer's uniform. But Afzal knew exactly when to slip out of the uniform into mufti and when to slip back. He mainly wore the Sahib's suits to impress the coolie women. For the rest he was content to get all the money he could out of the Sahib. And with an eye for the privileges he earned from his master, he had learnt to humour him even when the Sahib was in an ill temper.

5

LEILA said she wanted a necklace, a nose-ring and silken glass bangles to wear like those which the wife of Buta wore.

Buddhu said he wanted a coloured woollen ball like that which Narain's Baloo had.

Sajani wanted to do the household shopping on a scale larger than she dared to do at the shop in the lines, where everything was sold at a fabulous price.

Gangu kept putting them off for the first few days for some reason unknown to them.

On Sunday, the weekly day of rest allowed by the Company to the coolies as well as to the sahibs, Gangu and Sajani agreed that they two should go to the bazaar in the village of Bedhi, two miles east of the tea estates, in a sub-valley, outside the area of the gardens.

'Father, I want to come with you,' begged Buddhu, clinging to Gangu's legs importunately.

'But you will get tired, son,' said Gangu. 'It is a far way to walk and neither I nor your mother have the strength to bear you on our shoulders.'

'I won't get tired,' said Buddhu. 'I promise I won't want to be lifted. I will walk like a pahlwan.'

'Oh, take him, let us take him,' put in Sajani. 'He has been pestering me all the week about that coloured ball which he wants. We will buy him something.'

Oh, well,' said Gangu, looking across the room at

Leila, who stood, head bent, and quivering with the desire to accompany them, but modesty restrained her from expressing even with the light of her eyes. 'Oh, well,' he continued, 'if he is coming, you'd better come too, Leila, though I don't know who will look after the house.'

'I will give a call to Narain's wife to keep an eye on it,' said Sajani.

'There is no need to do that,' Gangu said. 'You'd better take all the money we have. We will be needing it. And then there is nothing here that anyone can take away. How much money have we there?' He paused for a while as Sajani went towards a corner of the room, lifted a brick by applying the lever of a pair of tongs, and began to take out some coins.

'Seven rupees and some annas,' she said, counting with difficulty.

'I suppose five rupees is the money we had left from the bonus for pocket expenses that Buta gave us before we started from the village,' said Gangu, talking more to himself than to anyone else. 'But have we earned only two rupees since we came?'

'I did some shopping at Seth Kanoo Mal's,' said Sajani. 'So don't think I have stolen any money. We have been eating food all these days.'

But Gangu was not accusing her of stealing his money. He was thinking, as he had been thinking for days, what a liar Buta had been in all his talk about high wages, about the free gifts of land, of being able to save money from one's earnings and of being able to set up on one's own after one's contract was over. The bonus apart (and Gangu was sure that it was a kind of bribe that Buta had given them to induce

them to come with him), what had the family got after almost a whole week's work? It did not even work out at eight annas a day for the whole family: three annas for him, two annas for his wife and daughter, and three pice for his child. Why, in the village he had been able to earn eight annas a day alone by working on the landlord's land when he had lost his own! And the planter Sahib, while giving him the contract, had said that there was no land yet which he could spare to give him for cultivating rice. But he would rather have had less wages if only he could have had land to grow his own rice and vegetables on.

'You know they cut the child's wages for two days, because the mistri at the weighing machine said the leaf was not properly picked', put in Sajani, intuitively divining his thoughts.

'Well, then, I don't know how I am going to buy him a woollen ball,' said Gangu. 'He had better stay behind.'

'I want the ball; I must have the ball,' insisted Buddhu, vehement with anger, and almost on the verge of sobbing.

'All right, all right!' said Gangu. 'Don't weep. You are eight now. You should grow up and not cry at the least little thing. Come, let us go.' And he issued out, holding the boy by the finger.

Sajani and Leila followed.

'Where is the place we live in, Father?' asked Buddhu. 'I mean what is the name of this place?'

'Assam, my son,' said Gangu. 'They say there is Tibet to our north, China to the east, Burma on the south, and Bengal to our west.'

'Why did we come here?' asked Buddhu, with the

inquisitiveness of a child who is growing up to mischief.

'To earn our living, son,' said Gangu. And his mind was shut off to that of child's babbling by a blank through which arose a strange disturbing strain of dubious reflections. He looked at the dark green of the well-ordered plantation on his side, which stretched for miles and miles upon the hilly country, and he wondered about the genius which had brought this difficult land into cultivation. The machine-plough which he had seen the Engineer Sahib working the other day on a bare patch of the plateau had fascinated him. But the beauty of that wonderful instrument was spoiled for him by the haughty arrogance of the assistant planter who went about ordering men with the sweeping gestures of his whip. 'Is he careless of what we think?' Gangu asked himself, pressing the irrelevancies of his thought into the odd corners of bewilderment. 'And is Vilayat the country where he comes from full of such miracles as this machine; and such men as this sahib? Did all the sahibs who came to own this land get their labourers by letting lies pass for truth, did they make deceit a virtue and exalt the worst to the best, make every pushful talker like Buta, into a sardar, and liberate all the selfishness that any *shaitan* could use for his own purpose? Do all good men die here, and others live on?' He heard the sharp swish of a torrent by the road and saw some coolies resting on a bridge which looked in the north to a sub-valley. He knew that there must be the pathway which led to the village.

'Everybody is going to the bazaar, Mother,' said

Leila, coming up towards her father. She was now thrilled at the idea of being in a crowd of men and women who had issued out of their huts and were going to trail along the pathway to the village, as thrilled as if she were going to a fair. And yet she had not quite got used to the varying physiognomies of the people among whom they had come to live: some were black as the back of a griddle and had flat noses, others were yellow with high cheek-bones and eyes like long beans, others still had great big noses like fried dumplings, and ugly, twisted faces bursting with skin diseases like rotten melons, and there were only a very few regular-featured people. She kept close to her mother as she had approached the groups which sat under the giant tree at the eastern end of the lines: she shrank from the crowd which rested on the bridge. But, presently, the family mingled with the crowd on the rough bullock-cart track, and Leila was no more embarrassed.

Two small ranges of hills ran parallel to each other and enclosed the circuitous route in the sub-valley through which they walked.

As the groups of coolies began to sing in choruses, Leila drifted across the dark sky of her soul to a frail light that enshrined the memory of a secret. Her mind went back through the wild stretches of her childhood during which she had played with the boys who grazed goats in the mountains, to the day when she had gone wandering with Jaswant, the son of the village school-master, whose stepmother had turned him out. Those mountains of her childhood were something like these hills, except that there wasn't so much vegetation in Hoshiarpur and the goats had to

climb high into the nooks and crannies to get their subsistence. Jaswant had once led her astray and she had almost slipped on a moss-covered stone. And he had leapt from behind and saved her from certain death. How terrified she had been at her peril! The vision of her mother scolding her had occurred to her in a flash. Then the vision of Jaswant weeping over her body. She could have borne her mother's abuse, even accepted blows from her, but Jaswant's weeping would have made her weep too. That small pale face with the sad green eyes was so lovely. She had wished he were her brother, her real brother, though, when they played hide-and-seek, he always waited for the opportunity to catch hold of her and squeeze her till her bones cracked. And he was such a tease, always disarranging her apron, taking her unawares and closing her eyes and asking her to guess who it was. She wondered where he was now, and what he was doing. Why had her father come so far away? For she might still have been in the same village as he, though her mother had forbidden her from going out to play with boys and she had but rarely seen him.

'Can you hear the bells across those mountains?' asked Gangu, turning to his wife. 'It is some caravan going beyond Kailas Parbat to the land where the Lama lives who never dies.'

'The Lama who never dies, Father!' exclaimed Leila. 'How can he live for ever?'

'At least so they say, child,' said Gangu, 'that he never dies.' And he reflected that the Lama must be the chosen of God to be immortal, though surely he was the only such man in the world. How could it be?

For throughout his own long life he had never met anyone who had attained such beatitude, except that the mountains, the rivers, the sky, the forests, seemed to be eternal, though did not the mountains shake with the earthquakes, like the one at Kangra when he was a boy? Did not the rivers change their courses? And the trees get stunted? The immortality of the Lama must be a myth, unless there was some hidden magic of which he knew the secret and with which he could prolong his life. But certainly nothing to do with God, for God, so the village priest said, was an invisible presence informing everything and yet not in anything. He had never met that presence, and yet, sometimes, he had a feeling when he looked at himself, and at men and things, when he had been absorbed, for instance, in his own happiness, the death of a relation or at the breaking of a bough, that there was in his own intense feeling a force before which he could have knelt in wonder. But that could not be God, though his wife might worship the stones all day and all night. There was no God. There were only men and life and death fulfilling their own purpose through cross purposes, as in a play. It was all a play, *Leila*. He recalled that it was the vision of this enchantment in his mind and the confirmation of it in the smile on his daughter's face when she was a babe, that had inspired him to give her that name. He looked at her.

The strange affection of tinkling bells in the pass beyond the hills had filled Leila's soul with a sympathetic song. And she walked in the stilled rapture as if she were an elfin spirit wedded to the air.

'Aren't you tired yet?' she said to her brother. 'I will

carry you if you like.'

'That village is not far now,' said Gangu, pointing to a few scattered straw huts on the slopes of a valley to which the path meandered by slow degrees like a fading vision.

And so it was, for Leila saw the white shrouded, chattering, babbling, gesticulating coolies pad quicker on their bare feet on the increasingly dusty roadway.

Leila quickened her steps too, though noticing her mother tarry with fatigue, she slowed down as she got to a milestone. And then she sat for a moment wondering what beautiful things there would be in the village bazaar.

The distant view of roof tops enlarged, and disclosed broad terraces of straw huts and stone huts and huts of clay, all covered with slates, with the glittering dome of a temple jutting out of them somewhere in the middle.

As they advanced towards it, a jumble of tumble-down booths appeared on both sides of the pathway, dirty and cramped with raw fruit and vegetables. And then began a succession of gaily decked stalls, some displaying remnants of coloured cottons, white cottons, satins and silks, some arrayed with soaps, beads, combs, pearls, mirrors and children's toys, some arrayed with utensils of brass, some full of sweets, some advertising medicines and perfumes and soda-water of varied hues, some others occupied by quacks and fortune tellers.

Leila's heart brightened at the sight of all this picturesque beauty.

Buddhu disentangled his hand from his father's finger and ran.

Sajani was on edge with excitement and shouted for the boy even as she herself rambled off towards the coloured-cloth stall.

Gangu stood among the conglomeration of lean men and fat men, tall hillwomen and pygmies, their children and their loads and their sticks and their hookahs, waiting to decide where to do his shopping.

'Come and buy, come and buy!' 'Try my shop, you get a free gift for every eight annas' worth of goods that you buy!' The clamouring voices of the stallkeepers hawked, each louder than the others.

'I don't know where to get the flour and the lantils,' said Gangu to his daughter. 'I shall ask the keeper of that booth.'

He darted towards the soap and bangle stall.

'Where can I buy eatables here, brother?' he queried.

'Can't you see that you can't swallow pearls and necklaces? are you blind?' snapped the keeper. 'There is the shop of Seth Dhanu Mal, the bania, further ahead.' And he proceeded to attend to a coolie woman who was fingering imitation beads: 'They are as white as your face is black. And don't soil them with your filthy hands,' he growled. 'One of you stole a necklace from my stall the other day.'

Leila, who had followed her father to the stall, but Buddhu came up dragging Sajani along as he turned away for fear the man should be nasty to her, having sighted the wollen ball he wanted on this stall.

'I want that coloured ball, Father,' he cried.

'How much is it, that woollen ball?' Gangu asked the keeper of the stall.

'Four annas, not a pice less,' replied the man

promptly.

‘Take two annas,’ said Gangu.

‘Four annas,’ said the man, ‘not a pice less. If you want to take it, take it or go; don’t crowd around my shop.’

‘Come along,’ said Gangu, ‘we will get you the ball at another shop.’

But, of course, his son would not move: he had set his will on those woollen balls.

‘I want that coloured ball,’ he cried. ‘I must have that coloured ball.’

‘I will smack you,’ said Gangu, ‘if you don’t listen to reason.’ And he dragged the boy by his arm for a few yards.

‘I want that ball! I want that ball!’ the boy cried, however, his head dangling over his torso, and feet dragging.

‘Acha, go, oh, the mother of Leila,’ said Gangu in desperation. ‘Go and get him that ball he wants. Go, all of you, and buy what you want. I will wait for you at the bania’s shop.’

As Gangu drifted into the street of regular shops, the cries of the hawkers grew louder, the congestion of men and women, sticks and umbrellas, increased, and a new sensation assailed him—the mixed odour of cow-dung, decayed fruit, the sweat of warm bodies and the strange, inexplicable asafœtidic smell which oozed from the puddles of water and animal urine on the hillroad.

Sajani took Leila and Buddhu back to the stall where the woollen balls were.

A crowd of women virtually wrestled with the beads and the pearls on the stall while some felt the

coloured silk handkerchiefs hanging down from the sticks, whispering their appreciation and delight at the luxuries. But Sajani paid four annas and got the boy the ball.

‘Come, Leila,’ she then said. ‘I will get you something too.’

‘Mother,’ said the girl suddenly. ‘I don’t think I see any bangles that I like; a nose-ring will be very expensive, and a necklace will cost a lot.’

‘What has come over you?’ her mother cried. ‘You were so eager to come here and buy the ornaments.’

‘Nothing,’ the girl said, as they began to walk towards the direction where Gangu had gone.

But there was something the matter. The timid shy bird that had fluttered so eagerly in her heart at the mere sight of all those desirable things went cold and numb from the realization of her father’s suffering. She recalled the expression on his face as he had stood in the doorway of their hut and asked her mother how much money they had. And she knew they could ill afford to spend any money on things which after all were not necessary. Had not they come so far away from their village because they were poor? And her father had listened to Buta’s tales and believed them. And now he was ashamed to find what a fool he had been. But he should not suffer so. They must not inflict any more burdens on him. All his hopes had fallen to pieces. And it was best to go on now till he could get some land. Then things might alter. Meanwhile, she wished she could cry with her happiness and pain, for it was both, at being here among all the sights and sounds of the bazaar, among the people and things, with her mother and her little brother near

her and her father not far away.

A group of hillmen crowded round the baskets of Seth Dhanu Mal's great shop which rose tier by tier under the sackcloth awning, supported by a bamboo pole. Gangu waited patiently in the middle of the road as his family came up.

Little Buddhu went off chasing the twittering sparrows which flew perkily about across the road near some sacks of grain unloaded from the Himalayan yaks.

Leila smelt the mixture of acrid smells produced by dry cow-dung cakes which burnt in a pile before some Tibetans with skull-caps, who puffed at hookahs filled with opium, by the drying tobacco leaves on the roof of a house opposite by the donkey dung which festered in the pony urine and by all the elements which rotted in the congestion of the Bazaar—and she felt sick and sat down on an iron weight which stood near the giant scale outside the bania's shop.

Sajani saw a yak excreting dung and rushed to the spot to collect the fresh paste to take home to treat the floors with, since there were only a few bullocks on the plantation, and cow dung was scarce.

Gangu sat in a state of apparent torpor, casually waving his hand across the droning track of a horsefly or mosquito, but really sinking into a panicky fear before the encounter with the bania. For the Seth, a small perky man, clad in a coarse shirt and trousers with a huge turban on his head, seemed a difficult fellow, with surliness and bad temper written all over his face from his small eyes, his long nose, his fine drooping moustache, his thin lips, to his grim little

chin, as he called Tibetan after Tibetan to settle his account. They appeared to become speechless as soon as they faced him or at the best protested once or twice and then accepted whatever terms he offered them.

'Oh, hooi sipi,' he sneered to the last Tibetan, 'come, open your eyes and lift the flap of your skull-cap and tell me what you want in exchange for those sacks of grain, in a language clear and simple, and with none of your mumbo jumbo.'

'Yes, Seth, but don't call me hooi sipi,' said the Tibetan, 'that is an abuse in my language. I want a length of cotton, white English cotton.'

'I only sell Swadeshi cotton here,' said the Seth.

'All right, Seth,' said the Tibetan.

'Oh,' the Seth called to an assistant, 'give him a length of the Gandhi mark cotton. And then he turned to the Tibetan and said, 'The sack of grain valued at the rate of three rupees a maund comes to six rupees. The whole length of cotton, is worth eight rupees, at $4\frac{1}{2}$ annas a yard. I will give you the whole length because I trust you, but I will put down the price of three-fourths of the length to you debit in my account book, with the interest on the unpaid money at the usual rate of a rupee. Agreed?

'Yes, master,' said the Tibetan, who had not followed the quick-tongued balancing of credits and debits, because he could not count at all.

'Hooi! Hooi!' snarled the leader of the caravan from behind, and Tibetan at the foot of the counter began to wave his head in negation to the Seth.

'All right then,' said the Seth. 'Go and eat the air. You can take the sacks of grain back across the pass.'

If you won't sell it to me, there are others who will. You stupid hillmen, you can't recognize a good bargain. It isn't for nothing that God has cursed you all with weak eyes and small hearts. And you have been justly condemned by the Almighty to become ugly with the smallpox that rages among you.'

'Seth,' said the leader of the caravan. 'You valued my twenty sacks of grain each at six rupees, which, according to your first quotation, is the price of a whole length of cotton. According to that, you must value all sacks of grain at the rate of the rupees, which is the price of a length of cotton, and not of a three-quarter length which you are giving that man.'

'Oh, is that so?' replied Dhamu Mal. 'Then I quoted wrongly to you. And I will debit the cost of the extra yards which you have obtained to your account.' And he forthwith proceeded to alter the figures in his long ochre-coloured portfolio.

'No,' roared the Tibetan. 'I take back the whole weight of grain that my caravan has sold you. We will go and sell it somewhere else.'

'All right,' said the Seth. 'Load your yaks and go, you filthy scum of the hills! I own all the grain shops on the plantations within twenty miles of here, and I wish you a pleasant journey to the plains and back through the thaw across the Himalayas. And give my regards to the Lama when you get home.'

The leader of the caravan was indignant. He turned back from the shop towards his men, and flushing scarlet on his high-coloured cheeks, ordered the yaks to be loaded.

'Come, then, coolie.' The Seth looked towards Gangu. 'What do you want?'

'Some good thick flour, Seth, and rice', said Gangu. 'And would you have the lentils of Mah?'

'What plantation do you belong to?' asked the Seth. 'We have stores at almost all of them except at the Stephenson Tea Estate. And you can buy all the provisions on the spot rather than come here. This is a wholesale depot.'

'Is it your son then who sits in the shop at the Macpherson Tea Garden?' said Gangu. 'He resembles you.'

'Oh, no, it is my brother,' said the Seth casually, as he was not concerned to give undue importance to his brother, who was becoming very popular with the sahibs, because he had a smattering of English and was better read than Dhanu Mal. 'What are the various foodstuffs you want? I will deal them out retail as a special favour to you, though I only deal in wholesale commodities here.'

'What is the rate of the flour, then, Seth?' Gangu asked.

'The same rate as at the shop on the plantation. There is no difference. I know exactly why you all come here. You thought that you would find a shop which would undersell my firm. You are cunning men, you coolies.'

'We have just come here,' retorted Gangu. 'How did I know that you owned all the shops? Of course, I want to pay the cheapest rates that I can, because I am poor.'

'And I want to charge the highest prices,' said Dhanu Mal.

'And that you call business,' said Gangu, grinding the words hard in his mouth. 'It is—' But he res-

trained himself from mouthing the words, 'theft and robbery,' though since he had been shocked to an awareness of the lies that Buta had told him, he had pulled up the reins of his peasant horsesense, and was resolved not to be goggled into running blindly even if he had resigned himself to bear all the burdens heaped on him.

'Do you want the provisions or not?' asked the Seth slightly chagrined. 'Hurry up, for I have no time to waste arguing with you.'

'All right,' Gangu said. 'Give me ten seers of wheat flour, five seers of the mixed lentil of gram and Mah, and ten seers of rice, two seers of sugar, and half a seer of butter.'

'Oh, Seth, you take the sacks of grain,' said the Tibetan caravan leader, coming back after a confused consultation with his men. 'We shall agree to your terms.'

'Eat, vomit,' said Dhanu Mal, 'you do not know what is good for you. Now you have come back to eat your own dung. I should really refuse to bargain with you, but I forgive you this time. Next time, if you want to do business, accept the terms I offer you, as you will not get such fair treatment anywhere else.' And he turned to his assistant. 'Oh, weigh that coolie the provisions he wants. I will have to attend to the hooi sipis.'

The Tibetans stood mute, immutable, their small eyes lowered under the darkness of their brains, even as they bent their vision to the invisible blanks of Nirvana in the temples of their villages, accepting the gifts that God showered upon them.

Gangu looked across them through the dark layers

of his own bitterness, and tried to penetrate into the fastnesses of their minds, and beyond them to the villages, where the tense insistence of their loins had driven the plough deep, deep, into the earth, where they had sprinkled the seed and waited for the rain from heaven to irrigate their furrows, where they had watched the opening of the buds and gazed at the flowering of the crop into fruit, with smiles broad as the rays of the Himalayan sun. He knew the meaning of their toil, he had known the beauty of that magic which was in the hard-yielding earth, he knew the love with which men spent themselves so that they could reap the fruit at the end, he knew the agony of having to part with that fruit, and the disillusion consequent upon selling it or bartering it to a hard, ununderstanding, small-hearted, mean bania or city broker. He yearned towards the Tibetans, and bursting with indignation and remorse at their suffering, and his own, wallowed in the welter of a music that made him dumb with its turbulence.

Sajani followed his gaze and then looked at the cloth before him into which the Seth's assistant was throwing the provisions, sensing the troubles of his stricken soul, but careful to see that the foodstuffs did not mix.

Buddhu cried with joy as he brought a live, fluttering, flapping, frightened pigeon which he had caught.

Leila twisted her face as she looked at the poor captive bird and tenderly appealed to her brother: 'Oh, leave it, Buddhu, leave it.'

The pigeon, however, was destined to go with the family and to sit for many days at the door ledge.

6

GANGU came back from the bazaar shivering with what he and his wife thought must be fatigue, due to the heavy bundle of shopping he had carried on his head.

He sat down to smoke the hookah near the fireplace, and thought he would soon be rested.

Buddhu brought Narain's little child and laid him near his father.

Gangu played with the infant, talking to it in baby language and tickling it, till the little one showed its new teeth with a broad grin that seemed to mock at the old man's apathetic torpor. For by now, Gangu was beginning to feel heavy in his body and slightly dizzy in his head.

When the meal was ready, he said he did not feel like eating and would lie down.

Sajani looked into his watery eyes, put her hand on his forehead, and found that he was burning with fever. She loaded all the blankets they had onto his body, wrapped him up nicely, and gave him the soup of ungarnished lentils drained into a pot.

Gangu felt the tense muscles of his body stretched like tight strings which were about to snap and his bones seemed to be breaking. He thought his spine had split into two, and he passed his limp hands across the hard stones of his thighs, as he moaned and writhed in the excitement of a heat which

seemed to suffuse his whole being from head to foot. His heart throbbed and his temples ached like a heap of cracking wood enveloped in a leaping inextinguishable fire. He rolled about for a while, turning sides, as if by the reversal of his frame from one posture to another he would cast off the weight which possessed his crumbling body. Then he lay, rigid and relentless, groaning in a delirious, half-whimpering, half-singing, strain. His wife pressed his legs, his daughter massaged his head with oil, till their eyes were swollen with sleep. He became less restive for a while, his voice trailing off into a monosyllabic 'Hai-hai' of self-pity, punctuated by deep sighs.

The night outside had embraced the teeming earth of Assam, and the dim horizon had melted into the invisible spaces of the mountains in a grim silence. A cool breeze blew, and both Sajani and Leila curled round Buddhu, tired and apprehensive and full of prayers for their welfare to the gods.

Hardly had they lapsed into sleep, when Gangu lifted his head and cried for water.

As Sajani got up to warm the water for him, he heaved his body, and stretching his arms akimbo, tried to shake off the fever by running out of doors.

Leila jumped up and dragged him back to the floor, and waited in the most heart-wrenching suspense by his side. She felt paralysed with fear and only stared at the smitten body, dazed that she did not feel his pain in herself and half-embarrassed that she should be in such close contact with her father's body. But her mother handed her the tumbler of water, and as she put it to his mouth, she felt a brave

and fearless urge in her breast to quell the fear of her tenderness, and she allied herself with him without thought, like a child, like a woman-child mother.

He took two gulps of the water and then handing the tumbler back with a blind arm which groped in the darkness, he sighed and muttered, 'It is hot, oh, it is hot,' and began to sing:

'The angel of death is coming to your door, O man, Prepare yourself for the final journey.'

'What is the matter? The father of Leila, what is it then?' Sajani asked solicitously, stroking his head and pressing his sides.

'I will not go, I will not go,' he said, caraven and half demented.

'Oh, what is it, what is the matter?' asked Sajani.

But now Gangu had begun to whimper and whine like a frightened child. And he waved his hands to and fro as if the defences of his will were beating back the onslaughts of some horror which his own body had exorcized into the image of a corpse without flesh, a skeleton, out of whose dark, dark, labyrinthine sockets descended shafts of light, like the luminous points of a cat's stare in the night. He shook with a paroxysm, ground his teeth and wetted his lower lip with a sticky saliva, and bit it hard. Then his face twisted, as if the deep wrinkles on his brow, the gathering lines under his swollen eyes, and the impassive weight of his hollow cheeks, had wrung out all the frustrated passion in his soul into a queer and uncanny distortion.

'Is your pain very bad?' asked Sajani, completely outside him, and absolutely incapable of entering his

skin, though she strained to go out to him and share his agony.

'He is in pain, Mother,' hissed Leila, 'can't you see?' And she leant over his forehead and laying her cheek on it, stared at the mask below her eyes. Through the half-light reflected by the cracks in the door she could see each feature of her father's face silhouetted against the white woollen blanket which her mother had woven for her and Buddhu some years ago, and which now covered Gangu. There was nothing of her father, as she had known him in her childhood, left in that face; there seemed nothing even of the visage to which she had modestly looked up, now and then, since she had grown up: it was distant and far removed from her even as the silent, sullen faces of the labourers in her village and in the town of Hoshiarpur, who slept in the corners of the sweat, or wrapped in clammy shirts and sheets of streets, strange naked bodies, glistening with the coarse home-spun. She raised her head and scanned his visage to see if she could glean the secret of that conflict which agitated him. She could not probe the stiff exterior of the bones which held his flesh tightly stretched to their sides. But she felt his breath come and go, and somehow, listening to its quarrelsome urges, she seemed to sense the significance of the battle against death that his life was fighting. She pressed his forehead and stroked his temples gently.

He blew a whiff of stale breath, sighed and opened his eyes for a minute. He could see his daughter bending over him, watching him with a small, pale face, shaped into innocence and tenderness. The realization of her presence seemed to move him.

'Are you there, Leila?' he said. 'Where is Buddhu?'

'He is sound asleep,' said Leila.

'That is good,' he said. 'But I must be getting up for soon it will be morning. Give me water, somebody. I am perspiring.'

His wife brought him another tumbler of water and applied it to his mouth.

'That's good,' he said, taking a gulp. 'Leila, you go to sleep now, my child. I will be all right. And you too, Sajani.' And he lay back, having apparently willed himself to live.

'I shouldn't die,' he muttered under his breath, 'till Leila is married, and Buddhu has grown up.' And he surveyed the sooty ceiling of the corrugated iron sheets illuminated by the pale flicker of the morning light creeping through the creaks in the door. His mind was empty from exhaustion and he could only feel the tingling of his flesh bathed in sweat. The ague in his aching body seemed to have passed, and he dozed off into a half-sleep, warm with the glow of the steam which oozed from the perspiration drying on his body. . .

He felt washed out and pellucid but clear in the morning. His mouth was parched, his lips were dry, and he had a queer taste in his mouth as if he were going to be sick. And his body lay like a flabby mass of flesh, as if its previous incarnation had betrayed it. But he felt alive and thought he would soon get up as he heard the deep resonant cry of the pigeon which had rested all night in a corner of the room behind the earthen pitcher.

The fever which had left Gangu had caught Sajani, however.

For as she was stirring about half-dressed in the dawn, getting ready to go out to work, she began to shiver and had a presage of the oncoming ague. She obstinately insisted on going through with the housework in spite of Leila's dissuasions, till as she stood dressed to go out to the plantation, she reeled with a sudden dizziness in her head, trembled and shook as if she had just emerged from a bath of ice-cold water, flushed red and fell.

Leila dragged her from where she had collapsed and, covering her with blankets, mats, jute cloth bags, with whatever she could find, she massaged her limbs as she sat frightened out of her wits at the thought of both her father and mother stricken with fever. And she ran to and fro with excitement as she realized that her mother lay in a swoon, unaware of everything around her and only moaned in a low voice: 'Oh, my God, Ishwar, Ishwar, Parmatman.'

The girl brought a tumbler of water and applied it to her mother's mouth.

Sajani blew at it with a sharp breath, gnawed her teeth in an agony till she frothed at the corners of her mouth and screaming as if she were going through the birth pangs of some terrible pain, raving hysterically, she writhed with clenched fists and shifted from side to side.

Gangu got up and came to her side. He put his hand to her forehead, and felt the blood throbbing wildly under her red-hot skin. 'She has caught my fever,' he said 'It is only the fever. Leila, put all the blankets I had, on her.'

Leila went and fetched the clothes. As she came to lay them on her mother, Sajani wailed a low

monotone, twitched her brows, contracted her face, and grinding her teeth as if her grim determination was failing under the spasm of slow pain which had crept into her, lapsed, and fainted again.

Gangu said he would go and fetch the doctor, and wrapped himself in a blanket.

'But you will die if you go out after you have suffered all night from fever,' said Leila. And persuading him to sit down and look after her mother, she was going to rush out to the lines and ask her way to the hospital, when to her relief Narain came announcing like a young cock at sunrise that it was time to go to work.

'My father and mother are ill, Uncle,' she said, coming to the door. 'I don't know what to do.'

'It must be cholera,' he said. 'Cholera!' And, without even looking at his neighbours, he ran towards his own hut, shouting: 'Cholera, cholera! the mother of Baloo, take the children out as soon as you can. Cholera! Cholera has spread!'

He had been through the epidemic last year and having seen two hundred coolies levelled out in less than a month, he dreaded the very name of the disease which brought such certain death.

Leila shook Buddhu and tried to arouse him from sleep, so that she could send him to fetch the doctor, as the noise Narain had made had unnerved her. Her brother only moaned and turned on his side, refusing to wake up. She went to her mother's side. Sajani's breath came and went like the murmur of an insect's wings against the tranquil air. Leila was almost frantic, as she heard Narain's shouts again, redoubled by the confusion of many mouths babbl-

ing, chattering and calling. She went to the door.

Narain ran up the lines in a fright, his legs failing, his whole frame shaking, and his clothes covered with sweat. By the time he had passed through the lines an ugly undefined rumour had spread and infected the coolies with such fear that instead of going to work, they began to congregate in little groups here and there and outside the houses of the Sardars.

One of the Sardars, too afraid to come out because he thought the coolies had come to wreak vengeance on him, blew his whistle.

The warders who kept watch over the lines, came up with loaded guns and surrounded the terror-stricken coolies who wept, moaned and protested in utter helplessness.

For a moment, the shrieks of the women and children and the abject appeals of the men mingled with the cackling of the hens in the Sardars' houses, and the crowing of roosters in the yards, and there was complete pandemonium.

Then Lieutenant Reggie Hunt arrived in pyjamas and a flashy dressing-gown, a revolver in hand, and guarded by his bearer who had a gun slung on his arm, and there was complete silence.

'What is the matter, you bloody swine, kicking up such a hullabaloo early in the morning?' shouted Reggie, keeping his face rigid and still.

'Cholera has broken out,' ventured Narain, shaking involuntarily with fear as he emerged from among the dark, demented crowd of bedraggled, sweating bodies.

'Christ, why do you want to make so much noise

about nothing then, bloody fools!' said Reggie Hunt. And he turned to Neogi the warder, who was giving conspicuous proof of his bravery by showing his khukri to the coolies.

'Keep them in position,' he said, and himself walked away towards the dispensary on the top of a hill a hundred yards away on the road, to call de la Havre or Chuni Lal, looking back constantly the while with his own angry blue eyes, and the steel glance of his revolver to see that the coolies were not following.

The sense of power which he felt handling a revolver in a critical situation soothed the feeling of suffocation that the still, invisible heat of the morning gave him. The sun was already up and the heat-waves were dancing on the deserted metallic road as he emerged from the dusty lengths which spread between the coolies' barracks.

Leila watched in suspense at the door, torn between the desire to go to her mother's side and the urge to rush out to still the crowd. Buddhu got up and came and caught the lapel of her headcloth, weeping and afraid.

'What is the matter?' her father was asking.

She did not know what to do and stood helpless.

Then she saw an English and an Indian sahib advancing towards the hut.

'This is the hut,' said a warder, approaching, and Leila withdrew.

'Will you call to the woman and ask whether we can come in?' she heard the English doctor say.

The warder stamped into the hut in his artillery boots and then shouted: 'Ready, Huzoor.'

The doctors entered.

The sweating face of Gangu turned to them from where he lay, with a hope that was balanced against fear on his tremulous lips.

'And what is the matter, little boy?' said de la Havre to overcome his embarrassment, to Buddhu, who stood sulking in the doorway with his pigeon in his hand.

Buddhu made no answer and stood rather awkwardly.

'All right,' said de la Havre, patting the boy on the head.

Leila, who had modestly drawn the apron of her dhoti on her forehead, pointed to where her mother and father lay.

'I will take their temperatures,' said de la Havre to Chuni Lal.

As he bent down to put the thermometer into Sajani's mouth, her eyes glared at him, lustreless and cold. He put his hand to her head, groped for her pulse, sounded her heart. There was no answer.

'Dead,' he whispered and stood dumb and listless, exploring for a ray of a light to illumine the darkness that enveloped his head.

Gangu had struggled up and looked into Chuni Lal's face, open eyed and open mouthed.

'She is dead', said Chuni Lal.

Gangu fell upon Sajani with a howl.

Leila shrieked and went towards Buddhu.

The boy sobbed as he stood frightened in the doorway.

CHARLES CROFT-COOKE lifted his tails, adjusted his afterdinner Havana, and sank into a big red leather arm-chair, in the lounge of the Tea-Estates Club. Then he stretched out his hand and took the *Calcutta Statesman* off a small table. He opened it, and spread it on his lap deliberately. His face was drawn and rather flushed. He seemed worried and tired.

For the planter's was a hard life, especially if the planter is a man like Croft-Cooke, who lived only for his work. Of course, Croft-Cooke, like many of his mark, rather exaggerated the difficulties of his position, particularly during his leave of absence at home, when he was wont to become extraordinarily garrulous, mixing reality with romance, so as to become almost a legend to his hearers.

'You who placidly sip your afternoon tea in a comfortable chair before the fire,' he would say with a humour half calculated, and half unconscious, as he lounged at the fireside, 'have no idea of the arduous conditions under which tea is grown in the distant parts of the Empire, for your delectation.'

And then he would plunge into a highly spiced description of the hazards of his own position. It would appear that he was almost the pivot of the universe around whom all the constellations revolved.

The manager of a plantation, according to him, had many roles to play. He was a sort of Pooh-Ba,

as far as he went. In the first place, he looked after the business and agricultural side of the plantation. Then he had to be something of a magistrate in settling small disputes among his labour force—one of those coolie girls, you know, causing a lot of excitement over her love affairs—and Croft-Cooke would cough, with a slight show of embarrassment. 'Or may be a witchcraft case. That sometimes stirs up terrible feeling among the superstitious natives—might be even murder—no control, you know,' and he would shake his head with the wisdom of a patriarch.

He had to be somewhat of a doctor, ready to deal with any emergencies! And a bit of an engineer. Roads had to be made, temporary bridges erected, houses built! It was all included free and gratis in the programme of events.

'An occasional raid by the hill tribes; not very frequent now,' he would add realistically, with an approving nod. 'Firm administration. But in the old days planters were known to be killed, defending their charges, or rescuing their children. The poor little mites were often kidnapped by the savages and carried to the mountains.'

A rustle of shocked but delighted horror among his audience gave a fresh fillip to his eloquence. The wild animals were always on the prowl in the dense jungles surrounding the plantations.

'Tigers will often enter the compound and invade the bungalows at night. You can just imagine what happens if there is a chance of snaffling a dog asleep on the veranda. But, of course, most planters are good shots with their guns, they have to be'—and he

would grin sardonically.

And plenty of other little happenings, all in a day's work. Floods, which swept down and engulfed the gardens, carrying away cattle, and tea-bushes. And he did not omit mention of the 'serious riots among the labour force. Political trouble in the neighbourhood! Occasional outbreaks of seditious and terrorist violence....' All this only affected him indirectly, but none the less strongly.

And, naturally, he was now a sufficiently, skilled master of narrative to bring home the moral, with a jocular twist of his lips: 'On the whole, you may consider your tea is worth what you pay for it—except that such a small proportion actually goes to the man on the spot.'

'But that is another matter,' he would add as an after-thought, 'and when all is said and done, life is by no means all work. There are social amenities. There is a club, with sporting and athletic ground. And a racecourse not far away in Calcutta! It is some consolation.'

It was indeed a consolation, the Club, housed in a grand bungalow in the mixed style of the Emperor Wu's palace at Peking, and Versailles, with tall rooms, salons opening on one another. It was furnished like an English country pub, with an old piano, dart-boards, faded sport photographs, whisky calendars, and the inevitable Trophies of the Hunt, and the Instruments of War! Situated in the pit of the valley, its wide veranda overlooked a vast polo ground, tennis-courts, croquet-courts, and gardens, all duly protected against the intrusion of black men, wild animals, hungry goats and cows, by thick

hedges and shady trees.

And life was by no means all work, except that, as he sat in the Club, Croft-Cooke was slightly worried about the epidemic of malaria that had started. He wished that that fellow de la Havre would turn up and tell him what he had done about disinfecting the lines. And there was Barbara quite silly about him. It was all a worry. 'Lord,' he sighed, and turned to the *Statesman* in his hand.

Barbara stood looking out of the window into the dark, rich night, heavily perfumed from the starry heavens to the dense mass of the earth, which was alive with the rustling of trees, occasionally interrupted by the croaking of the frogs and the metallic reverberation of the song of a beetle. She too was waiting for de la Havre, afraid that he would catch malaria if he stayed too long in the lines. She turned round on hearing her father shuffle in his chair.

He twisted his side, crossed his legs and was going to lift the paper before his eyes, when his wife entered, her hair freshly dyed a flashy auburn, her face thickly powdered, and as much of her body as was not covered by a long trailing mauve evening-dress.

'Have you seen Hitchcock, Charles?' she asked.

'No,' replied Charles Croft-Cooke, nonchalantly.

For a moment Mrs. Croft-Cooke paused in the doorway which separated the lounge from the drawing-room. She felt a little awkward, though she had long ago got used to the mechanical replies with which her husband invariably greeted her questions, and though few would have suspected that in her narrow, matter-of-fact mind there was any trace

of sensitiveness. Since Mr. Croft-Cooke was generally preoccupied by his business, and from the very outset had repulsed his wife's naive, though well-meaning attempts to take an interest in the inner workings of the plantation, Mrs. Croft-Cooke had led the rather isolated existence of an Anglo-Indian woman in remote parts of the Empire, completely cut off from any real contacts, apart from the occasional years she spent at home in Yorshire. The bungalows of the planters were scattered over the miles of plantations, far away from each other and a frequent exchange of visits was difficult. So she read Anthony Trollope, played patience, or, when Barbara was young, gave piano lessons to the child, or sang old songs which she remembered from her maidenhood, or slept to fill the long dreary Assam afternoons, during the weekdays. She tried to have as full a weekend as possible to make up for the lack of society on ordinary days. And since she was of a robust constitution, and not too gifted by nature with an acute awareness of the problems of existence, except for spasmodic complaints of a lack of consideration on the part of her husband, and a deepseated longing for a son, she had accepted a quiet life, passed between 'home,' the Club, and a few weeks' vacation at Calcutta now and then.

Once, about ten years ago, Charles' brother, Leslie, who was a photographer at 'home' had told her what a poor deal Charles gave her. And she had begun to yield to a belief in his friendship. But she had pulled herself together and kept to the straight and narrow path. She had almost forgotten the incident now. But somehow, since then, she had felt an increasing

gap between herself and Charles. And she wished still more that she had a son. There was something so pathetic about the playful boyish face of tall Hitchcock that she could have taken him on her knee and caressed his hair if only he were small.

'He's going to play ping-pong,' said Macara, the burly manager of the Stephenson Tea Estate, with a smile that was a little too broad, as he brushed past her on his way to the dining-room.

'Margaret, dear,' called Mable Macara, plain-faced but well adorned, as she entered the room after her husband. 'I want to ask you something important. You know those curtains you had made, dear, for your bedroom. How many days did your *darzi* (tailor) take to make them, and how much did you pay him? Mine is charging me eight annas a day, but I think it is too much.'

'You are being thieved, my dear,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, emphatically, giving up the chase for Hitchcock. And she relieved her feelings in a vehement diatribe against the newer among her countrywomen who did not know anything of the country and spoiled the servants. 'When Mrs. Tweetie, that slip of a girl from Nottingham was here, last winter. . .'

But Major 'Bob' Macara broke in as she paused for breath, to ask his wife whether she and Margaret would come and make a four at bridge with Charles and him.

'You go along, dear, I will follow,' answered Mabel, leading Margaret to a sofa in a corner of the drawing-room.

'I know what you women are when you get together,' said Bob, with a cynical smile, and eyeing

Barbara on his way, he proceeded towards Croft-Cooke. 'Bearer,' he shouted and then turned abruptly on his feet and sat down.

A white-liveried young servant appeared instantaneously at the door, from where he waited in the veranda.

'Two burra pegs—Charles, you will have one?' Macara said, all in one hearty mouthful.

Charles Croft-Cooke nodded and, as he folded his paper, he began airing the eternal grievances, which the black and white columns had reawakened in his mind.

'They have been at it again in Calcutta,' he said with a weary sigh, and he read from the *Statesman*:

'Following the outrage at the convocation of the Calcutta University, when a girl student fired a revolver on Sir Stuart Humphreys, the police have unearthed a plot...'

'I shouldn't worry,' interrupted Macara, 'they are always at it,' and he beamed belligerently towards his companion. He was not in the mood to discuss politics to-day.

But Barbara who had heard his reply, knew only too well what he would have said if he had chosen to air his opinions in his turn. She had become self-conscious about the spirit that made the Empire ever since she had met de la Havre a few months ago. And now all the well-worn phrases that they used in such conversation, seemed cheap and silly from repetition: 'These bloody nationalist,—always anathematizing the Government for exploiting and bleeding the country! Weren't they always fighting amongst each other before we came? The maintenance of

settled and ordered government!... The Japs and the Germans will come in if we clear out; Let them just look at the development of the tea industry; Why it is obvious in the tremendous rise of population in this country! Our plantations are fairly swarming with kids! We have made Assam a hive of prosperity!

Barbara shifted uncomfortably on her feet as she became obsessed with the crass stupidity of this grandiose club. She was disgusted to feel that she herself had been bluffed by it all, especially as she recalled how at first with all her impetuosity she had resented de la Havre's constant criticism, his jokes against his own country and the bantering manner in which he had debunked her for fun. And then, one day when they had gone riding to the fresh-water springs, he had revealed to her the dim anxieties and the strange, crushed tendernesses of the lives of the coolies. See had suddenly realized that they were human beings like herself. Before she had merely taken them for granted as poor, low men, created by God to do all the work while she took the air in her baby Austin, or showed herself off in riding habits. Even now she had mostly to take them for granted. You could not go and embrace the proletariat suddenly to make amends for the way you had treated it in the past. That was what John seemed to her always to be doing. Besides, his obsession about the coolies got in the way of his affection for her, as he always seemed preoccupied writing about them. She resented this. And she resented his exhibitionism too, though, inside her, unconsciously she was becoming more malleable and flexible. And she was trying to fight the reserve which was to her

almost second nature, and which he denounced so fiercely.

For she was fascinated—fascinated by the force that was so genuine inside him, however much he acted, fascinated by the intensity of passion that seemed to well up in him all the time, by his ardour that was as simple as breath, and by the desperate sincerity of that ardour. And as she stood there, immured in the dense groves of trees that seemed to brood in utter silence, she could almost hear in her thoughts the accents of the half-cynical, half-tired voice in which he had told her about the beginning of the tea industry in Assam.

The country had been independent territory ruled by hill chieftains. A man called Robert Bruce had insinuated himself into the confidence of one of the Ahom kings and taken up his abode in the capital. One day he learnt of the existence of the wild tea plant in the king's territory. And, automatically, he interested the East India Company in the plant. It was found that it was genuine, native to the country and superior to the Chinese variety, which was the only one known at the time. About this time, Bruce's patron, the Ahom king, waged a war against a neighbour, and, of course, Bruce persuaded the East India Company to take part in it. John Company willingly volunteered help and came into the fray in their well-known role of arbitrators. And since the British had never done anything for anybody without seeing to what they could get out of it, they soon dethroned both the warring kings and annexed the country. The great Assam Company, with its capital of over a million sterling was floated. The

industry expanded and other companies were started up. And large areas of land came into cultivation. The famine-stricken peasantry from various parts of India was recruited to supplement indigenous labour, and the Government of India helped the trade by giving the planters the power to imprison or kill any coolie who broke his contract. After half a century of agitation, that right had been taken away and had been handed over to the magistrates. And it seemed that, under British rule, with the help of the monopolists, the tribesmen as well as the coolies were learning to become perfect gentlemen, and, John had maliciously added, they will soon begin to wear top-hats!

Meanwhile, the tale of Robert Bruce's heroism and individual prowess, the very stuff of Empire building, was remembered, as Barbara knew. But she had not known the reason why St. Andrew's Day was the National Festival of Assam, and she had never known why Johnny Walker was Assam's national drink. And of course, she had never looked at the dust of the struggling underworld, its mire, its dirt and its squalor . . . For she was more concerned with the face than any facts . . .

'It was sad; she said to herself, but what could she do about it? It was no good to spoil your whole life worrying about the injustice of other people's lot, and to make oneself miserable all the time. They might have been so happy, the two of them. And she could never argue with him, never attempt to reason. He always overrode her protests with the sweep of his eloquence. And all that she knew was that she was wrenched inside her, torn between herself and her

love for him. And now there was no sign of him and only the uncanny, dead silence of the dark earth and the darker vegetation which flowed beyond the window.

But she had better not make her plight too obvious to everyone, she thought. She did not want to precipitate another of those hopeless arguments with her parents! She would go and sit by Mrs. Macara and her mother.

'There has been a case of malaria at the plantation,' she heard her father say, as she attended to his conversation with Major Macara again, after her moments of self-absorption.

'Oh!' said Macara sipping his whisky with blissful ease, and twitching his eyelids as if to shake off sleep that was descending upon them.

'Can't you send her "home"?' Mabel was saying to her mother, as Barbara approached them. But as she saw the girl coming towards them, she blushed, quickly changed the subject and began: 'Romances certainly start in unexpected ways. A mouse began mine. Come, Barbara dear, and sit down.'

Barbara smiled, took a cigarette from a stand, lit it and sat down by them moodily.

'I always say everyone is screwy about something', Mabel continued, with a provincial heartiness that years of Club life had been insufficient to eradicate. 'Even Mum, not that I mean to be disrespectful—all the same, she was screwy about mice. You just had to mention mice, and she got an expression on her face like a theatre queue juggler swallowing golf balls.'

'Oh, stop it,' said Barbara, smiling in spite of her-

self.

'So you can imagine the spasm Mum had,' continued Mable, 'when she saw a mouse shampooing his whiskers on the kitchen mat. . . .'

'I feel like a drink,' said Barbara, knowing that Mabel's silly chatter would go on uninterrupted. Often she was amused by the life and vigour which Mabel brought to her gossip, but to-day she was too impatient and irritable to listen. She got up and went towards the dining-room. Hunt, Ralph, Tweetie and Hitchcock were coming out of the door.

'The khansamah there?' she asked Hunt, seeing that he held a glass of whisky in his hand.

'Yes,' he said, 'but he is bringing the bar here. Come and join us.'

Barbara smiled, sneered, turned back and walked ahead of them.

Hunt and Ralph rushed for the most commodious leather chair in the middle of the room. Hunt got there first as Ralph, a square-shouldered, long-armed, heavy-legged farmer's son, was clumsy and drunk. Hitchcock, tall, handsome, self-conscious and shy, crooned, his neck inclined in a Grecian bend. Tweetie made towards the piano, and seating himself on the stool, began to sort the music on the stand beside him.

Barbara was nervous at the damage threatened to her evening dress by Reggie's race for the chair. And she was disgusted at the state they were in, quarrelling for it like babies. She wheeled round on her feet and went towards the door to order a drink.

'What's the matter with her to-day?' she heard Ralph ask. And then, after some low whispers she

heard Hunt begin: 'There was a young girl called Barbara . . .'

She felt a wild impulse to go back and strike the man hard on the face. But she knew that she would only be violating her own dignity by heeding their behaviour. A deep wave of despair ran through her, and as she walked, her eyes were filled with tears, her mouth dried with a sigh. She bent her head shamefacedly as she ordered a drink. A weight leaned over her thoughts. She stood caressing the leaves of one of the palms that guarded the door by the veranda, as she waited for her drink. The jaded air of 'Smoke gets in your eyes,' came in the difficult staccato of the wheezy old piano which Tweetie was hammering. How stupid it all was, she thought. And at heart, she was most angry with herself, at her own lack of courage in still conforming to all the prejudices of the clique amongst which she lived, when she had seen through the crass stupidity of the whole show. But she sought to condone herself in some measure, by turning her self-disgust against the graceless antics of the Club members.

All these people, all, including herself, displaying themselves to each other in their evening dress, Sunday after Sunday, trying to look beautiful and important, and putting on airs, talking pompously about politics and business, or cracking jokes, telling stories and singing songs that meant nothing to them, and hiding their real emotions; never saying the things, the real, irrelevant things they thought about while they were on their own. . . . Perhaps they wanted to say those things, but thought they would be laughed at if they said them. And instead, they faked

thoughts and emotions, not perceiving that they became even more ridiculous in so doing. She could laugh at them now, she could just burst out laughing. They would say she was mad. But she knew she was not mad, and she could laugh at them, at all these secretive, underhand, insidious creatures, because she was open and frank. Why could not they talk straight, like innocent, honest people? Why were they so polite and hypocritical? Their rotten songs and dirty stories belied their moral tones. Why could not they be like de la Havre, who spoke his mind out freely? She felt that that was why she admired him. At first his frankness had shocked her. But she could see now how real he was, straightforward and blunt and honest, relentlessly pursuing the truth, as if the lava of some volcano was bursting within him, so that it could rise into a flame and sweep across the lies. . . .

There was a noise of horses' hoofs on the gravel path outside.

As if she wanted to escape from the noisy chorus of 'Top Hat' that came from the next room, Barbara laid aside the glass of port wine in her hand and rushed out.

De la Havre was coming up to the veranda with his assistant, Chuni Lal. They both wore solar topees, shirts, breeches and muddy riding-boots, which looked incongruous with the atmosphere of the Club.

'Hallo,' Barbara called.

De la Havre pressed her palm. In her impetuosity and ardour, she seemed like a ray of sunshine in the heavy, dark night, a child without a trace of self-consciousness, and coloured rich by the intensity of

her budding passion. De la Havre recalled the first impact of her young laugh on him, the intoxication of his senses by the reckless mischief in her eyes, and the sensuous curves of her swelling breasts, the curves of her whole form, from the arched lips to her shapely legs.

He led her into the lounge, with Dr. Chuni Lal following behind.

'Hallo, everyone,' said de la Havre, genially and still preoccupied with his mission. But happily for the nervous de la Havre, as the chorus of 'Top Hat' filled the drawing-room, no one noticed the newcomers except Macara and Croft-Cooke.

'What's the news?' asked Croft-Cooke.

'The infected houses have been segregated for a few days, and disinfectants have been sprinkled all over the lines,' said de la Havre. 'But there has also been a death in Major Macara's estate. That's what kept me from getting here earlier.'

'I don't know when these lousy coolies will learn the value of cleanliness and sanitation,' said Croft-Cooke with a frown which wrinkled his forehead into hard knots.

'They don't use preventative medicine, I suppose,' said Macara, drily.

'If they knew for certain when an infected mosquito was going to bite them and infect them with the destructive parasite,' said de la Havre, smiling awkwardly, 'they could, of course, walk up to the dispensary and swallow a bitter pill. And the medicine would circulate in their blood a little before the parasite multiplied. But, like all things in the future, that knowledge is withheld from them,

and they might be bitten any moment of the night or day, since they don't use mosquito-nets.I thought we might order the use of nets.'

'How will they fix the nets on the ground, since they sleep in the lap of Mother Earth?' said Macara, laughing. The idea of the coolies using mosquito-nets seemed comic to him. He appeared to be in a good humour. His fat, padded face was set with the glow of whisky, and his heavy-lidded eyes dropped benignly on everything, as if he were in a sort of trance.

'But you must be thirsty,' he broke off. 'Will you have a peg?'

'Yes, thanks, two; one for Dr. Chuni Lal,' said de la Havre.

'Bearer,' called Macara.

'Do sit down, Doctor,' de la Havre said to Chuni Lal, who stood aside uneasily, as if waiting for orders. And he himself rested back into a red leather soft.

The music had ended and the members of the chorus now drifted about the room, crooning or calling to the bearer for more drink.

'I am afraid,' said Reggie Hunt, walking shakily up to Chuni Lal, 'niggers aren't allowed in this club.'

'I say, Reggie, he's my guest,' said de la Havre, and he got up and advanced towards Reggie Hunt. 'You ...'

But he could not find the words, drew back, afraid of himself, and stood livid with rage.

'Reggie! Reggie!' said Macara, getting up and trying to drag Hunt away. He shared Reggie's sentiment, as indeed did all orthodox Anglo-India, for as

a general rule, Indians were not allowed to be members of English clubs, but this was not the way to go about it. It would have been better to talk to de la Havre later and ask him not to repeat his invitation to Chuni Lal.

'Bearer,' bawled Reggie Hunt, at the top of his voice to the servant, who had appeared at Macara's call. 'Turn the Babu out.'

The other men were dumb and started into nothingness.

The ladies were breathless.

Chuni Lal began to walk away.

De la Havre stood trembling with rage.

'Never mind,' said Tweetie, patting him on the back. 'He has had a drop too much.'

De la Havre shrugged his shoulders. 'Good-bye,' he muttered and followed his assistant.

Barbara looked towards the verdurous abysses that yawned beyond the door and would soon swallow up the two men. She did not notice anything outside her. For, in her head, over her eyes, the oppression of the hate, the cruelty of this club weighed like a dense gloom, only now and then illuminated by a thought.

On the one hand was Reggie Hunt, stupid and ignorant, on the other hand those coolies, dying of malaria, and in between, de la Havre, who might be weeping now, for all she knew. And these cruel, hard people would call him a 'gutless cissy' if they knew that, while he talked, he was so tender, that he would often begin to cry. If only, only these people had the hearts to feel, she cried out in her soul, if only they could see how outside them, there were peo-

ple, poor people, donkeys, dogs, who wanted to live, and suffered because they could not. It was terrible, this conflict. And now she did not know what de la Havre would think of her. He associated her with all these people. And all the misunderstandings that would arise through Hunt's conduct. She could not bear it. She felt faint. She rested her head back, and looked into the pit of darkness that lay beyond the door.

8

DUMB with the sudden shock of Sajani's death, dazed by the hard glitter under the pupils of her wide-awake eyes, Gangu had groped in the darkness of his brain for a confirmation of the testimony which his senses afforded. But he was blinded and could not at first believe that she whom he had come to regard as immortal from the habit of nearness, could have lapsed into an utter and ultimate silence, and become *swaraghash*, a resident of the celestial heavens. For a time he moved in a trance, beckoning the despair of bereavement to come and take possession of him. But only his lips trembled and his head hung down over his hands, in the muffled indifference of the twilight in his brain.

Then, however, as he crouched woodenly by the dead body, he looked at her again. In the violent struggle of her will against Yama, her even, round face had lengthened to the extreme limits of its contour, so that her open mouth disclosed the decayed teeth with a yellow film, protruding out of their purple gums. This was not the face which Gangu had always known, eager with all the living impulses. It was haggard and worn and the blue veins under its transperent flesh were discoloured a ghastly green. Gangu had had her body, but the tingling warmth of her passionate embrace seemed so distant now. He tried to touch her but he could not. In a flash, he

seemed to comprehend the tragedy not only of his sex, but the significance of that ugly fact which stared him in the face — death.

The day had passed in a protracted loneliness, which gathered the threads of memory and reflection, of his present suffering and that of his children, into a knot in his heart. He sent his children away to play, and sat listening to his own heart-beats since his hut had been segregated and no one was allowed to come near it. He wept bitterly as the resistance of his capacity to suffer in silence broke down, and between hours of hysteria, he sat choked and convulsed by the agony, the intense misery, the utter helplessness of his despair. The experiences of his life, some broken-edged and hollow, like a battered pitcher, some vibrant with joy, but mostly common and even, like the daily round of endless jobs, all coloured by a dissatisfaction in the belly that was more akin to hunger than to fear came quivering in his bones, like a fire that burns the wood with an insidious intent, all raised a heavy cloud of sorrow which hovered over him at night.

The next morning he got up from where he lay with his son, paralysed by the weakness that his fever and the succession of the previous day's strenuous thought had produced in him. And the fact faced him that he had no money for his wife's funeral. The fuel for the cremation would not cost anything because there was plenty of firewood in the jungle, but the performance of the last rites required by religion was imperative. He must buy a red cloth and get a bamboo hearse made. And he had spent the entire sum earned by the family, and the re-

mainder from the bonus, during that ominous shopping tour in the bazar. The brother of the Sahukar, who kept the shop at the end of the lines, had offered when Gangu first came here, to give him a loan of money at the usual interest, should he want it. But Gangu had returned a categorical 'no', for he was firm in the resolve he had made on leaving his village that he would never again borrow money from a Sahukar: they had been the cause of his ruin and every moment of his exile reminded him of the curse of borrowing. But what must he do now? He must cremate his wife. The body could not be left to decompose in the heat of the small house. Besides, the children cried with fear, and the Dr. Sahib had ordered him to remove the body yesterday lest they catch the disease.

As he stood with his head weighed down over his chest and avoided looking towards the dead body which lay sprawled under a sheet, lest the sorrow which filled him now where there had been his love, should break down in another agony of despair, he recalled that Buta had told him that the Manager Sahib was a sort of *Mai-bap*, who lent money when the coolies were in need. He thought he would go to the big *daftar* and ask the Babu to present him to the Sahib.

'Come, Budhu,' he said to his son, with a new tenderness, 'Come, my lion, we will go and make arrangements for the funeral of your mother.'

He wished for a moment that Buddhu was older and could be his comrade, his right-hand man, who could share the burden of responsibility which lay so heavily on his aged shoulders. And he issued forth,

followed by the boy.

The sun was already high up, and pools of light dappled the copper-hued faces of the men, women and children who were plucking the trees in the garden. And Gangu felt a remorse of conscience that he was not at work, accompanied by pangs of pity for himself that God had singled him out for all the suffering in the world.

‘I will make a good sheaf
Plucking, plucking, plucking
Two leaves and a bud
Two leaves and a bud.’

The gatherers sang the familiar song of the plantation as they congregated in groups of eight to twelve.

It seemed to rend his heart. There was a lilt in it, a swing. Sajani had picked it up, and she and Leila had sung it, though he himself was too shy to join in. And now Sajani was no more. And the world went on all the same.

He hurried away stumbling and hitting his bare feet against each other in the onward rush.

Buddhu had been left behind as the boy had begun to chase a frog on the edge of a ditch.

‘Come, Buddhu,’ Gangu called. ‘If the frog makes water on your hand, you will get leprosy. Come, leave it, my son.’

Buddhu ran up, more obedient to-day than before, since he had realized from the serious look on his father’s face and the stillness of his mother’s body, the meaning of this tragic occasion.

Gangu saw what seemed to be the shape of the

Burra Sahib's little *motu car* shoot across the wooden bridge which connected the ridgeway of the planter's bungalow to the side-road by which was the shed of the office. He took the edge of his loin-cloth to his nose so as not to inhale the red dust aroused by the car, and stopped for a while to let it settle down.

'You play, my son,' he said to Buddhu as he entered the office compound. 'I will be along in a moment.'

He was pale and breathless with fear and weakness as he ascended the two steps of the veranda.

'What do you want?' said the red-coated Sikh chaprasi, who sat on a bench by the punkha coolie.

'Sardarji,' said Gangu, overawed by the ferocious beard of the red-coat into joining his hands to him. 'I want to see the Sahib.'

'What is your business?' said the peon, belching and caressing his beard with his right hand at the same time.

'My wife —' began Gangu. 'Sardarji — my wife has passed away.' And at this his eyes dimmed and he continued abruptly: 'I want to beg the favour of the Sahib Bahadur for a loan.'

'Where is my *nazrana*?' said the chaprasi, stretching his hand for the money.

'I shall owe it to you, Sardarji,' said Gangu eagerly, knowing that he would never get an audience with the Sahib if he didn't 'warm' the hand of the chaprasi.

'You people forget to pay and I forget your names,' said Hamir Singh. 'How am I to remember you? There are so many of you. You give it to me off the money you get from the Sahib Bahadur.'

'Acha, Huzoor,' Gangu said. He would have pro-

mised anything at this moment, not because he wanted to please the Sardar, but because he had to have the money for the funeral of his wife.

The chaprasi went into the office.

A moment later, Babu Shashi Bhushan Bhattacharya came out with his hands in the pockets of his pantaloons, his head hunched down, his eyes looking over the glasses at the skeleton of the labourer from the angular head to the skinny legs.

'What do you want?' he said.

'Babuji, the owner of my house has died. I want to beg the Sahib for a loan for her funeral expenses,' said Gangu, taking his hand to salute the clerk.

'Are you the coolie whom Buta brought here?'

'Yes, Huzoor.'

'But, arré illegally begotten, you never gave me a present when you were recruited, nor did that swine of a Buta. Why should I present you to the Sahib?'

'Huzoor,' I didn't get any money till the end of the week,' said Gangu. 'And I had little left from the bonus to spare. So I couldn't give you a gift. But I mean to send you a basket of sweets on the *holi* day.'

'What good are your dirty sweets to me?' said Shashi Bhushan. 'Besides, I don't know your caste! I want cash.'

'Babuji, I am a Rajput, and the food of my house is pure,' said Gangu. 'But you shall have the money.'

'Where is it?' said Shashi Bhushan, taking his right hand out of his trousers and extending it before him, with an insolent flourish.

'Babuji, I promise to give you some of the money which the Sahib may give me if you talk to him in angrezi and get me the loan I want,' said Gangu.

'My wife died last night. And I have been ill. Take pity on me.'

'Why don't you coolies look after yourselves better?' said Shashi Bhushan, relenting, and, blowing a breathful of the vapours of disgust and sympathy, he shuffled his feet.

'It is the working of fate, your honour,' said Gangu, lifting his joined hands in utter thankfulness and humility at the Babu's show of sympathy.

Shashi Bhushan raised the chic from the door whence he had emerged, and disappeared.

Gangu waited anxiously, exploring the neat, prim world of the office with beds of flowers in the compounds, chics in the veranda, utterly still except for the screeching of the something of the factory, a little way away from the office. And his gaze concentrated on the door opposite him, which the Babu had entered.

'Hamir Singh,' the Babu's voice came from the Sahib's room.

The chaprasi at once lifted the chic and Mr. Croft-Cooke emerged, solemn and straight-faced, spreading the acrid aroma of his cheroot on the air, with a puff that ended in a frown.

Gangu raised both his hands to his forehead to salaam.

For a moment there was silence. Then Croft-Cooke ground the staccato of his wrong Hindustani.

'What money?' he said.

'Yes, Huzoor, *Mai-bap*,' said Gangu.

'How much do you want?'

'Twenty rupees, sir,' said Gangu.

'What security can you offer me for the return

of the loan and interest?' said the Sahib. 'Have you any ornaments?'

'No, Huzoor,' said Gangu lamely. 'We didn't bring any ornaments out from the village.'

'What security have I that you will return the money?'

'Huzoor, I am your servant on the plantation,' said Gangu. 'I will work the debt off. And if you should be pleased to give me a little of land as Buta Sardar promised me, I shall work hard and pay the money off by selling what I grow.'

'That is all uncertain,' said Croft-Cooke. 'What do you want it for, anyhow?'

'Huzoor, my wife died of fever yesterday,' said Gangu, lowering his voice.

'Oh, that malaria case!' shouted Croft-Cooke.

'Yes, Huzoor. I had fever, and then she had fever and she died,' said Gangu.

'Get out! Get out!' exclaimed Croft-Cooke, turning purple with rage, and staring at the coolie. 'You bloody fool, get out! Get out! You have been spreading infection all over the place! Didn't you know that you were under segregation? By whose orders did you come here?'

'Forgive, Huzoor, forgive,' said Gangu, withdrawing without showing his back to the Sahib, his hands joined abjectly, his face twisted so that the hollows of his cheeks trembled with humility.

'Get out! Get out!' Croft-Cooke reiterated his shout, while Shashi Bhushan Bhattacharya, thinking that he would get into trouble for arranging the interview with an infected person, came out, craven and bullying, and waved his hand with an historic ges-

ture calculated to impress the Sahib.

The chaprasi advanced with a military stride and, extending his right arm like a red signal and shouting, 'Go away! Ja! Ja! Chale Ja!' drove Gangu out of her premises.

Gangu walked away from the office deeply chagrined and humiliated. But he had the fear of God and Mr. Croft-Cooke in his heart. Twice or thrice he looked up to the heavens as if he expected the fire of Almighty God to scorch him, and he dared, for the briefest moment, to turn his head back to see if the Sahib were not following him with a cane, to execute to the full the punishment which he deserved. For, being in the throes of a suffering, more intense because it has descended upon him with the suddenness of an avalanche, he was prepared to accept any humiliation. It was only one more reward for the misdeeds of his past life, he said to himself, with the resigned indifference of the Hindu. And it was as nothing compared with the blow which God had struck him yesterday by taking his wife away.

Once he had been beaten by a fellow peasant in the Hoshiarpur hills, and he had resented it and sought to revenge himself. But he dared not think of wreaking vengeance on the Sahib. The Sahib had abused him for spreading disease, he felt, and he tried to assure himself that the white man would have given him money if he had not been in segregation. He wiped the sweat that covered his face and looked for his son in the neighbourhood. The heat-waves shimmered before his dim eyes and he could see Buddhu come dancing towards him across the deserted highway.

'Look what I have found, Father,' the boy said eagerly, 'a nail.' And he showed a rusted bolt on the palm of his hand.

'Drop it, son,' Gangu said, inclined to-day to believe in the superstition which his wife held fast, that to bring a piece of iron home on Monday was the sure harbinger of an impending tragedy.

At this Buddhu began to sob.

Oh, come, my son,' said Gangu, picking the boy up in his arms. 'Don't sulk. Don't begin to cry, especially as I am in trouble! Let me go and arrange for your mother's funeral. Haven't you any sense, to realize that she is dead?' And he put him down.

Buddhu quietened and walked behind him.

As Gangu came to the bridge on the main road, he stood for a moment and asked himself what he could do. His mind was an utter blank. He looked around and saw the plantation spotted by the forms of his fellow labourers.

Suddenly the form of Buta, the Sardar who had brought him here, shot out like a phantom in his slow brain, and stood before his unseeing eyes in the distance. Gangu had an idea. He would go and ask him to lend him a little money, 'For, after all,' he said to himself, 'he was responsible for my coming here and should help me, especially as he deceived me. Not that I bear him any ill will for his having deceived me, nor that he owes me an obligation, but for old friendship's sake — and we come from the same village.'

'You run along home, my son,' he said to Buddhu, patting him on the head, 'as I am going to see your Uncle Buta. Tell Leila I shall be back in a little

while.'

'Can I take my nail?' the boy said.

'All right, son! Yes, but go, run away,' agreed Gangu.

The boy ran across the highway.

Gangu turned his back on him and then dragged his sinking body on heavy feet towards the strip of land where he knew Buta was superintending the clearing of the forest.

He had hardly gone twenty yards when a vague feeling of apprehension overtook him that the Sahib or the chaprasi might come and catch him abroad and kick him.

He looked towards the office and surveyed the plantation. The deep blue of the sky spread a garish haze across the valley and seemed to have subdued every element by its vast expensive force into an utter stillness, so that Gangu could hear his heart pounding against his chest. He pushed along, wearily, his will breaking against the turbulent waters of his soul. But the coast was clear. And the immediate feeling of fear rose like a dim mist and mingled with the heavier cloud of sorrow that hovered on the horizon of his being — a doom like the invisible elements that hold men in thrail with the oppressive weight of shadows incarnated by the dull-witted fancies of generations living continually in the presence of death.

As he got to the edge of the clearing and sighted the coolies at work, he stopped and called:

'Sardar Buta Ram!

Buta stood sideways, leaning on a staff, and heard and knew the voice, but did not answer. He had

received the news of Sajani's death yesterday, and was inwardly embarrassed at the misfortune that he had brought to Gangu, by bringing him here, but he did not want to accept the blame.

'Ohe, Buta,' Gangu shouted a little impatiently.

'Gangu Ram,' returned Buta. The servile and the deceitful in him answered to the bullying more easily than to a respectful call. And he came towards Gangu.

'Friend,' he said, with a sad expression and a low mournful voice, 'I am very sorry to hear of the demise of the mother of Buddhu.'

'Can you — can you give a loan of money for the cremation?' said Gangu. 'I have not a pice and the body has been lying in the house for two days.'

'I am afraid,' said Buta, 'I have no money in my possession. The little savings I have made are in the bank and I do not like to withdraw them because the Sahib's signature is required and the Babu has to be paid a gratuity for negotiating that. But you can get a loan from the Sahib on your wife's trinkets.'

'The Sahib will not give me a loan,' Gangu said. 'I have just been. He beat me for coming out of quarantine. Oh, friend Buta Ram, if only I had known things were going to turn out this way, I wouldn't have come here.' And he took his hand to his eyes to wipe the tears that had welled up in them with the reproach against the Sardar that he had suppressed into self-pity.

'Go to the bania in the bazar, then,' said Buta, shortly.

'Of course, he charges higher interest,' he continued, affecting a false solicitousness.

'I will have to pay the higher interest and break my oath and go to the Bania,' Gangu said. And knowing that Buta was being a hypocrite, but yet forcing himself to believe in his goodwill, he added: 'As you know, brother, I can't offer the body of the mother of my children to the jackals and the hyenas.

'Acha, then, you will excuse me,' said Buta, turning abruptly. 'I must get on with the supervision.'

9

'If only I need not go away from here,' thought Barbara, reclining on the divan in de la Havre's study, which overlooked the hospital. Something in the room seemed to lure the senses. It always seemed to her somehow that there was more life in this room than in the whole of her mother's house. And she scanned the room once more, to see why it was so.

Books, books, books greeted her eyes everywhere, books in the long shelf which reached almost to the ceiling; books on the writing-table, arranged in well-ordered heaps at the four corners; books on the floor, lying about in what de la Havre liked to call 'a studied disorder'; books on the mantelpiece, supported by two statuettes of men bowed in thought; books under the solitary picture, a woman's face by Modigliani. She remembered she had been quite jealous of it the first time she had seen it.

What was it that fascinated her about this room, that had brought her here this afternoon, in spite of her mother's protests? There was the ugly Javanese devil mask over the pile of manuscripts against the wall facing her, dirtied by the dust and transmuted into a dark brooding image of hate.

'Orderly and untidy,' he always said. It was cer-

tainly untidy! And she got up and touched the backs of books on the floor, to see if he had dusted them since she had nagged him about it. 'A woman converts a room into a boudoir,' he had said, laughing at her reproaches. 'A man makes a workshop of it.'

He always managed to get round the point! How he talked! And how he conjured himself into a phantom as he talked, haughty, disdainful, mocking and ironical—a devil. A face without any of the characteristics of handsomeness, even ugly in its smallness, and yet, how it lit up when he opened his lips to deliver a harangue. Those tender eyes of his flashed, the knotted forehead shone suddenly, the cheeks went pale, and the chin thrust forward with an emphatic assertion. What a passionate fire he had! And how he spent and consumed himself! It was that spark of fire that had kindled her. He had a woman's sensitiveness, fierce and gentle; a tiger's tenderness. That, she thought, was probably why she loved him. He did not frighten her as the big uncouth bodies of most men did. He had said that she had a slight sex recoil. She wondered what he meant.

But, anyhow, it had made no difference to her love for him. He could not tell her that she had any complexes about sex so far as he was concerned. She had been a virgin and she had given herself to him without the least little self-consciousness. 'And it is perfect between us,' she said to herself. And her thighs warmed with a sensuous ripple, a kind of tingling touch like the feel that silk always gave to her flesh. And from the dark gulf over the concave, through the maleness of him that had grown in her,

arose a quivering that spread in the breathless gloom like a delicate ache, mocking her senses, till she sat involved in the aura of a deadly wonder.

It was perfect between them, she said, and nobody else knew. People, her people, did not know that, when they said she ought to give him up. She would not give him up. While she was she and he was he, while the world held them both, nothing would separate them. But where was he? Where was he? Of course, it was mad to come on spec! She had been waiting for hours.

In the brief lucidity of a self-conscious moment, she felt naive. And then she felt a sudden panic overtake her. And she sat consumed, the violin of her thoughts pining for a touch that would release some dense music to drug her into a stupor. The long, dark song flowed over her and she leaned on her elbow, torn between self-disgust and the surrounding silence. She resigned herself for a moment, accepting the world and herself as inevitable in their limitations. Then her chin fell sadly and she resolved to write a note and go, lest her mother should get anxious about her.

She got up from the divan, and coming to the table looked for a clean sheet of paper. On a board she found whole lots with his hieroglyphs of notes scribbled across them. 'One of his boring composition,' she thought, with a slightly contemptuous smile. Probably part of the book he was writing. But she took it up and read it through.

'Why do these swarming, under-nourished, bleary, worm-eaten millions of India suffer so? Is it because the festering swamps of the tropics breed disease,

and that they cannot check the tribulations of destiny? Certainly it seemed to me so, at first—that fate had here conspired with the seasons to obliterate everything capriciously. And it seemed an old civilization in decay. But then, a bad system of education has created an intensely narrow vision in the specialist, so that most professional men let themselves be ruled by catchwords and phrases that wouldn't do credit even to Colonel Blimp. And most medical men are, "with regrettable exceptions," a cheerful, virile sort of people, sociable and fond of their beer, and inured to the belief in "a beautiful operation." Few of them are burdened with the kind of thoughtful imagination, patience and insight which is required to create a coherent world society. On the other hand, they come to think in terms of abstractions. And being alternately occupied with work and sedentary, they lose contact with their fellow-men, become detached in their outlook, and unsympathetic in their dealings with human beings. I might still have been in that state if I hadn't come to India, and seen the sordid side of tragic existence. To think that hundreds of men in the I.M.S. have passed by India—except Ross, perhaps. But why didn't it occur to anyone—the simple, obvious thing that people don't need to read Marx to realize here. The black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while all the money-grubbing, slave-driving, soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and build up monopolies. Therein lies the necessity of revolution in this country. On the one hand, the vast masses, prisoners of so many chains, bearing the physical signs of grief, of lassitude,

even of death, and on the other hand, the supercilious rich, wrapped up in their self-assurance and complacency, never once questioning the ideals of glory and power and wealth. . . .’

‘How like him,’ Barbara thought, ‘the perorations! Always the same heroics!’ The whole tone of the note annoyed her, but she had read on once she had begun, because it was written by him, and because she felt she would know how his mind worked in private, what were his thoughts and feelings when he was alone.

She turned over some leaves, scanning other notes written in a hurried, nervous hand.

‘Report on Labour Conditions in India,’ she read, ‘A. A. Purcell and ——’ but she could not decipher the second name.

She put it aside, and then, on second thoughts, she picked it up again, and examined it more attentively. It seemed to be a series of quotations, among which were interspersed at frequent intervals de la Havre’s own comments.

‘The position of the plantation coolies in India,’ she read, ‘is, in many respects, similar to that of the cotton plantation slaves of the Southern States of North America, of whom Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. If there be any difference, I think that actual inquiry would prove that the present economic condition of the Indian coolies is worse than was that of the negro slaves in America.’

She remembered once having started on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when she was staying at the seaside, with some friends of her aunt’s. It had been a small brown book, with very close print. She had selected

it from the little bookcase, which was affixed to the wall in her bedroom. It had looked the least uninteresting of the half a dozen books, which were primly stacked on the top shelf, together with the *Church Hymnal* and the Holy Bible.

She skipped a few paragraphs of the closely written sheet she held in her hand. Then her eye was attracted by the name of Wilberforce. It seemed familiar.

'The present system of plantation labour,' the writer continued, 'is a curse and a crime. It is a monstrous crime against humanity. All that was said, generations ago, by the Wilberforces and Cannings and Garrisons and Lincolns against the hideous shame of slavery, could be repeated and added to, in respect to what is transpiring to-day on the tea, coffee, rubber and other plantations in India.

'75% of the coolies on the Assam plantations suffer from caratomalaisia (bad eyesight) for lack of proper nourishment, fats and greases.

'50% of the population of India suffers from dental diseases for lack of any milk in the diet.

'Two million women die in childbirth in India as a result of malnutrition.

'20% Anglo-Indians and members of the upper classes of India die of gluttony, overeating—another form of malnutrition.'

Then she read another quotation, written in ink on the margin. 'Wages of coolies on the Indian plantations have not changed for the last seventy years. The wages of a coolie in 1870, were five rupees per month. In 1922, the maximum wages of a coolie on the Assam tea plantations did not exceed seven

rupees per month (about ten shillings and sixpence). It should be remarked in this connexion that the price of rice—the coolies' only article of food—has more than doubled during this period. The coolie spends practically the last of his monthly wages on his rice. The clothes or rather rags, worn by the Indian coolie, occupy but an insignificant positions in his budget.'

And at the bottom of the page was another paragraph, the last sentence of which was heavily under-scored: 'On the tea plantations of Assam a man gets 8 d., for eight hours a day, a woman 6 d., and a child 3 d.; in the tea factories the worker earns 9 d. for an eight-hour working. The coolie suffers not only this low level of wages but frequently from indebtedness to his employers in outlandish districts where he is dependent upon the shops provided by the employers for his foodstuffs, fuel, etc. This indebtedness, together with the isolation of the plantation, renders it difficult for him to seek employment elsewhere, and this practically reduces him to a life of economic slavery. His treatment often borders on the inhuman and his chances of justice and redress are chimerical.—Dr. V. H. Rutherford.'

She sighed deeply, and then a feeling of irritation surged up within her. She shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'After all—'she thought, but she could not complete her phrase.

She sighed again, and started fumbling among the scattered pages which she had disturbed. There were several more pages of notes and quotations.

Then she came across a poem on the top of which was a note:

'A poem is really an aphorism, an epigram, because it is the statement of a mood. Why do most poets extend it to an inordinate length and force out of themselves conceits which prevaricate the truth that they mean to express? Why should they extend their sentiments beyond the limits of the original impulse, except when it is necessary to qualify the vision? Otherwise it is simply rhyming cat with hat, and conforming to the convention for verse-writing set up by Peter Public and the whores of literature. Not that this is a good poem, but I stopped these lines which occurred to me about Barbara when I couldn't go any further:

'Love has no wings
To soar up to men's thoughts,
Thought has no line
To plumb the immensities of love.
And all our pretences of virtue...'

'Amateurish,' he had himself written on the margin, and Barbara accepted the verdict though she would not have known a good poem from a bad one.

A further entry was the title of a poem apparently not yet written: 'On the death of a coolie woman from malaria.'

'He was so bitter,' thought Barbara. If only he would stop thinking of others and look at himself a bit. He seemed obsessed with blood-and-thunder ideas. So tense and self-righteous all the time. She wanted to live her own life. She had no particular wish to change the horrible world. And yet, she recalled the first time she had met him, she had talked of unselfishness, saying how people always thought of the good of others.

And he had retorted back vehemently, 'No, no, no. Where the hell did you get that idea? Man is selfish, man is evil, there is nothing more horrible in this universe than the cruelty of man to man.' And she had lapsed back into a dumb slumber of amazement, quelled into a dazed somnolence by the rising pressure of his querulous voice. Oh, if only, she wished—But she could not define her wish, and began to scribble on a piece of paper. She wrote with an uncertain hand, crossing out a word, and correcting the spelling of another....

'Hallo,' his voice rang suddenly from the veranda, breaking her sentence. And she could see him rushing eagerly like a young boy.

She went towards him, slowly, controlling herself theatrically, even as she was wont to fling her arms in the air at other times.

'My darling! My sweet!' he said, reaching out to her in a frenzy of excitement. And he was going to kiss her but she held herself back as she stood enclosed in his arms.

'Do I come before the Revolution or after?' she asked, her face brightening, her hands extended toward him off if need be.

'I want to kiss you, darling!' he said.

'First answer me. Do I come before the Revolution or after?'

'I shan't get the one without the other,' he said.

Barbara laughed.

He pecked a kiss at her.

'Where were you?' she remonstrated. 'I have been waiting for you for such a long time. I was writing a note to you and going away.'

‘Where is the note?’ he said. ‘Let me see.’

‘No, no,’ she cried rushing towards the table. ‘You are not to see it now.’

But he rushed ahead of her, snatched the note till it tore on the side, caught hold of her and flung her on the divan and pocketed the note.

She protested with a pout.

‘Baby,’ he said. And he pushed her back so that she fell on the divan. Then he bent over her and looked into her steel grey eyes, as if he could catch the reflection of the sunrays that warmed his senses, warmed the blood in his veins, till they swelled with the saturation of life....

She lay down on the bed in the position in which she always rested when he had her, her head tilted up from two slippery cushions, a smile on her lips that was the twin sister of her laugh, opening on her half-parted lips in a perplexed sadness, as at noon-tide.

He contemplated her for a moment, drunk like time when it dances, cresting the heights of his blood, till the rich odour of her body enveloped his face. And he felt it was good to be involved like that, delicious. His eyes closed and his feeling stood resistant in the tendrils of his flesh, through the drowsy heat. Then his eyes opened for a moment, and he caught a glimpse of her flushed face. But he turned his eyes away shyly, as if he knew that there was a fugitive tenderness about her, like the perfume of gold, which would vanish if touched, serene and evanescent like the furtive sunshine in the middle of a winter morning, clear and not certain whether it would go on shining. He cupped her head in his

hands and lay as if his mind was darkening with the madness of the night that weighed his brow. And he felt a sudden weakness steal into his bones. . . .

'May I kiss you, darling, again and again?' he said.

'Of course, darling,' she cried, 'what did I come here for if not to be kissed?'

He leaned upon her with his long, thin body and kissed her, softly then deeply, controlling his teeth from imprinting a bite. And as he lay torn and convulsed by the bursting music in his blood he felt that his whole universe would never break up into particles, that the sea and the earth, that space and time would always inhere in this sun. . . . A wild wave surged over the dark chambers of his mind and he kissed her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks, her neck till the warm eddies of the brine spread over her face. He rose with a quivering desperation and covered her mouth again till their bodies swayed like the shining seawaves, shoulder to shoulder, arms intertwined. . . . Suddenly, however, de la Havre pricked up his ears as if he heard footsteps on the gravel path outside. . . . Then he thought it was an aperception and relaxed.

He heard Barbara's breath come and go, and he lifted his head and looked into her grey-green eyes. There was that light just under the upper lids which had gleamed out at him the first time he had looked at her, 'merrily tempting on to deeds at the end of which there was supposed to be a certain Christian hell.' Now he could hear the footsteps distinctly, proceeding from the gravel path, leading to the veranda. He released her from his clasp, and stood up.

The warmth of the embrace still filled him. He looked at her shyly and saw that her face was suffused with an animated flush that made her the exact replica of a fair-haired Botticelli angel, virginal and pure, as if she resented his manhood, even as she loved him. Will she always remain inviolate he wondered, virginal and innocent, even after the completeness she has had? Why, her hands, her feet, her eyes, her lips, her hair, her movements had joined with his in such a perfect equation, that though all the children of the world might have been the results of carelessness and mistakes, his child and hers would not. He felt the tremulous exaltation of being near her, and yet his attention was distracted. He poised over her in a mixed ecstasy of desire, pain, happiness, fear and sorrow and frustration. He spoke to her in an incomprehensible tumult of whispers. He wanted her.

'Do I come before the Revolution or after?' she asked, pouting her lips like a baby asking for sweets.

'After,' de la Havre said, lifting his head towards the veranda with a delicately ironic smile, and turning from where he stood, looking out of the window, he muttered, 'Gangu, the coolie whose wife has died.'

The he went to the door and shouted:

'Come in, Gangu, come in.'

'Salaam, Huzoor,' said Gangu, and sat down on the gravel path.

'Come in, come in,' said de la Havre.

Gangu looked confused and embarrassed, and stepping up to the veranda sat down there.

'No, come in here. Show yourself to the Miss Sahib,' said de la Havre.

Gangu was dumbfounded at this gesture of goodwill. But he had been the recipient of other kindnesses from this Sahib during the last few days. So he walked up, his whole body shaking, his legs lagging behind his torso, his head bent forward in humility.

'Salaam, Missi Sahib,' he said, without raising his eyes to Barbara.

'Salaam,' said Barbara, who had got up from the divan and hurriedly brushed her hair into respectability with her fingers.

'How's the fever?' said de la Havre, in tortured Hindustani.

'Better now, Huzoor, by the grace of God.'

'Your children all right?'

'Yes, Huzoor, by your grace they are well.'

'I suppose they miss their mother.'

'Yes, Huzoor, but God's will be done. They remember her. But soon they will get used to her absence.'

'Death strikes the poor,' de la Havre said.

'Ji Huzoor,' said Gangu. 'It is true. It is true. The poor have no chance. Everything works by favour here. The Sardars are rich, but the labourer people starve.' And he became silent.

De la Havre noticed that the man was making an effort to say something he could not utter.

'What is it, Gangu?' he urged. 'Tell me, can I help you in any way?'

'Han, Huzoor,' said the man, bending his eyes down out of shame. 'I came to ask a favour.'

'What is it, then? Come, let us have it,' said de la Havre.

'Huzoor,' began Gangu. 'Buta Sardar brought me

here, from my village in the Hoshiarpur district of the Punjab, with a promise that I would get land to grow rice on. The Manager Sahib said there was no land yet for me, when I arrived. Now my wife has died, as you know. And I had no money for her funeral. So I have borrowed twenty rupees from the Bania. Now, I can't pay back that loan and the interest on it, Huzoor, out of my own and my children's earnings. Nor can we all subsist on the wage we earn together. I shall be grateful if you could make a recommendation for me to the Burra Sahib for land, Huzoor.'

'Yes, I will do that,' said de la Havre. 'Certainly you ought to get land; it is in the contract of every labourer that he will get land to grow rice on when he comes here. I will see that the contract is enforced.'

'Salaam, Huzoor,' said Gangu with tear-filled eyes, 'I am very grateful.' And he turned to go.

'Wait,' called de la Havre. And he fished into the breast-pocket of his jacket for his wallet. He emptied the contents on his hand and went towards Gangu.

'Huzoor! Huzoor! protested Gangu.

'Now take this,' de la Havre commanded. 'Here is five, ten rupees—and eight annas. That is all your luck. Take it and pay off some of the loan which you have contracted from the Bania and I shall see what I can do about land for you. Salaam, go and look after your health.'

'Salaam, Huzoor,' said the bewildered coolie, faltering with gratitude. And he stepped back without showing his posterior, till he almost stumbled by a pillar of the veranda.

'Look out,' warned de la Havre. 'Salam.' And, returning to the room, he continued to Barbara, 'and this is what goes on all the time. Your father abused that poor old man the other day.'

'He didn't did he?' exclaimed Barbara, horrified.

'Well, that's how it is,' said de la Havre, shrugging his shoulders as he walked up and down with excitement.

'Oh, how hateful!' she cried. 'How loathsome!' And she felt ashamed that she could not feel the content of the man's suffering as he did, that she was forever debarred from it, and could only mouth a conventional term of regret.

'It is no use hating anyone,' said de la Havre. 'It is the system. You must hate the system. You and I have been brought up to be what we are by the sweat of these coolies.'

She felt a kind of reproach in his voice, more against herself than against himself, a kind of disguised contempt, as if he were hating her, hating her because her father was cruel to the coolies. . . . And she felt a quiver of shame, a quiver of self-disgust go through her. This was the terrible thing that she wanted to give herself to him, give herself entirely, body and soul, and he would not have her. . . . Sometimes, they had been completely each other's. And then it was as if they were naked to each other and transparent. And only the trees and the mountains and the grass existed, apart from themselves. But then there was this continual tension. And they were separate except when they touched each other. Perhaps it had to be so; perhaps one was always at cross purposes with others, except now and then; perhaps

one was always giving and the other person not taking; perhaps one would always be misunderstood. . . . And yet, only a few minutes ago, before the coolie came, they had been together. . . . And now John seemed far away, pacing the room to and fro, looking furtively this side and that. . . .

'What about the system?' she said resentfully. Something in her inner self told her that he was acting, being dramatic.

De la Havre gave an uneasy chuckle, then stiffening his head with a superior thrust, burst out with a self-conscious righteousness, half real, half mocking.

'It is bloodyhell,' he said, facing Barbara.

'John !' she cried. And she strained the love that had grown in her to move him to come to her.

But her cry increased the barrier between them. And the awkwardness of distance joined with the shame of the frustration in his bones, and with the bitterness he had been trying to muster into himself, by using Barbara, the daughter of Croft-Cooke, the slave-driver, as a pretext, as if he wanted to revenge himself on her for his unappeased passion. . . .

'You know, your good Queen Bess, the Virgin Queen, was anything but a virgin at heart. She was the first of the great line of the gold-diggers of Broadway. She had heard of the jewels, the diamonds, the sapphires, the silks, the muslins and the spices of Hindustan. And she would any day as soon have whored herself to old Akbar, the Great Mogul, or his son Jehangir, as to Philip of Spain. . . .'

'But what's the matter, darling,' she said. 'Have you gone mad?' And she ached to go out to him.

'Yes,' he said. 'These Indians are bloody fools. They

are so hospitable. They let themselves be robbed. Jehangir is drunk and gives away his whole kingdom to Nur Mahal as the price of her love, and a cup of wine and a song. Shah Jehan's daughter is ill. An English doctor attends her. The Emperor gives away valuable ports in reward. "There are no two countries where gold is esteemed less than in India and more than in England," said an English poet. "And the reason," he added, "is because the Indians are barbarous and our nation civil." Well their civility is written large on the map of history, the civility of the British nation. Our Britons, who never, never shall be slaves, went and enslaved the millions of Asia'

'But you are a Briton, too,' said Barbara, shifting uncomfortably at the malice implicit in de la Havre's speech, and still wondering what demon had suddenly possessed him. But she knew that he was off on the track of one of his outbursts she knew that he had drifted far, far away from her.

He seemed to pay no heed to her protest, but continued, his vehemence unabated.

'By open loot and bribery and corruption, and by drawing large dividends from the Company's shares, they built up large fortunes. And, when all this booty had piled up in the merrie homes of England, the Britons who never, never shall be slaves invested the spoils of war and robbery in the manufacturing industries of Bradford and Manchester. There was plenty of coal and iron lying about and the working classes could be used for profit. Watt had invented the steam engine. And the soot of the belching furnaces began to mix with the mist of the old swamps

and bogs of England, and the London fog arose. But that was at any rate progress of a sort !

Barbara was now caught, in spite of herself, in the perilous spell of his bitterness, hating him and yet loving him for the taut, fine stretch of his body, fascinated by his high-pitched, almost feminine voice and his histrionic manner.

'The horrors of that first period of industrialism in Lancashire,' pursued de la Havre, quick to sense that he had caught her attention, 'are unmatched except in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras to-day. A sixty-five hour week for a shilling, and children under nine doing two shifts a day! The proletariat starved while the middle classes entrenched themselves in the country homes of England !

'And then the big bosses sought to be nearer the source of raw materials and cheap labour, for the artisans of India who used to produce the textiles were unemployed by Britain's cut-throat competition, and had sought to return to the land, where the peasantry was already highly taxed and strained.

'So the Britons who never, never shall be slaves, went and enslaved the millions of Asia, went and built grandiose, Gothic homes for themselves in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and barns for the coolies to work in, barns, or rather two, three four-storied sheds. These were ostensibly good enough for the niggers, for they didn't seem to die when put into them. These coolies didn't look as if they would require the breathing space of seven hundred cubic feet, or the floor area of thirty-six feet that an ordinary human being requires. "Why, good God," they swore with true British heartiness, "even the workers

at home don't have the breathing space that the text-books are harping on." And these heathens were the scum of the earth, who lived without any notion whatever of hygiene and sanitation. They seemed happy enough and contented to share the blessings of law and order brought in by the British, and they were overpaid, considering they could live on as little as a farthing a day. Hadn't they willingly given up their share of rice to the Tommies during the mutiny, and lived on rice water? They must be made to see the way of Christ, of course, and persuaded to give up their heathen gods and godlings. The padres were doing their best. And, of course, slowly and surely, they must be taught the alphabet. But education only makes people discontented. Meanwhile, "the air of Poona would do the world of good to my gout," or "Mary, hadn't we better buy a house on the Malabar Hill, under the palm-trees, overlooking the sea?" or "Perhaps we can go 'home' this summer, and spend the season at Bath : we will be in time for Her Majesty's jubilee, and take a yacht to see the Regatta at Cowes!"

Barbara looked with faintly questioning eyes at his face, as if to know how much of this was the truth in him which wanted to go out to her, and how much he was inspired by his tongue into a mood of ungenerous bitterness. Perhaps he really wanted to reveal the tender, raw wound of his hurt soul to her. If only, only he were in her arms, she could tell him that she would understand, understand, if only he would lift the frown from his terrible inclination and abandon the frozen gesture that made him stand, detached, apart, destructive and diabolical. She was

going to accept defeat, to withdraw that question-mark of hers about the system, but at the last moment she said, as if she did not care :

‘Go on,’ and made a sign with her hand as if winding the gramophone.

‘Well,’ he said, lowering his voice, ‘what the Edwardians inherited from their forefathers, they didn’t improve, because they never went to live in the land where their pioneering forefathers had gone, but wintered abroad on the Riviera, and came back home for the spring. “Oh! to be in England, now that April’s there!” “Who sang that?” wondered Sir Alfred. “Was it Tennyson or someone from the naughty nineties? It wasn’t that bugger, Oscar Wilde?”’

‘Darling,’ she cried, feeling more isolated at the impact of the unmentionable word.

‘When the Georgians put money into an Indian business,’ raced on de la Havre, ‘when they fought like bulls and bears on the Stock Exchange and on London Wall, they didn’t see the oppression of the black, brown and yellow coolies that was necessary to produce their dividends.

‘And when, after enjoying the monopoly of Indian trade for generations, our Britons, who never, never shall be slaves, found they had cut their own throats by introducing the steam engine into India, not only because their home manufactures competed with their colonial manufactures, but also because the Indian monied classes were pressing for a share in the industries of their country, they began to bully the coolies and bleed them as much as they could before the judgment day arrived.

'The Burra Sahib now thinks that Britain's trusteeship of India is being betrayed. He will no longer be boss. He blames the whole affair on education abroad and sentimentalism at home. He has made his money in this country, but feels no gratitude towards it. Your mother has the mutiny complex, dyes her hair, bullies her servants, and joggles around the dance floor. And the Indians who have got a share in industry wear top-hats, though they keep their wives enslaved in purdah. But the poor, bloody coolies sweat their guts out, working for four farthings a day, to the tune of Reggie Hunt guffaws. Hurrah for the Britons who never, never shall be slaves. Three cheers for the man who imprisons old Gangu on the plantation by false pretences, keeps him well guarded and refuses to give him a strip of land which he promised by contract. But what's a contract with a slave? Less than a scrap of paper! And that's your Empire!'

They were both very still after he had ended his harangue.

For a moment, she felt he was a complete stranger to her, who had effaced her and destroyed her, pulped her, and left her to herself, a mere nothingness. She hated him for his airs of righteous indignation, and his references to her parents rankled. But then she thought of him as her lover, whom she had worshipped secretly, longed for, whose body had been one with hers. And she tried to forgive the angry restlessness that had possessed him, and wished he would come to her and put his head in her lap.

The late sun threw long splendours down the north study window, and there was the ghost-like hush of the oncoming twilight in the air. The shadow

of the leaves of a bough hung on the window, like the silhouette in a Chinese picture.

De la Havre paced up and down the room, still puffed up with a certain high seriousness. Then he stood, watching the long stillness of the hills from the window, and summoning the courage of his tenderness so that he could go near Barbara. Should he stay at the window alone? Should he go to her with the air of a martyr? He knew he had wanted to give the best in him to her because he loved her. But then he became conscious of the fact that he had been naive and showed off. . . . He proceeded towards her shyly and patted her upraised face, and kissed her. . . .

There was a knock at the door and de la Havre stood up.

'Huzoor, the Burra Sahib is waiting for the Miss Sahib,' came the voice of Ilahi Bux, Croft-Cooke's butler-bearer.

10

GANGU dug the earth with a spade, as he had no bullocks and plough to till with. He wished he had his old bullocks here, Dina and Moti, whom he had sold before coming away, and the wooden plough that had served him thirty years. That plough would be lying still, perhaps, he thought, by the pool outside his hut. And the whole scene came up before his eyes: the small lichen growing on the edge of the wall with Subedar Lachman Singh's chickens playing havoc among the greens, and Bhola, the toothless village dog, running across the fields in search of an imaginary rabbit, and shy women threshing the hay in the sun, while the smell of the fresh corn hung over the earth.

He dilated his nostrils to inhale this fragrance, but he sensed that the air which blew in Assam was different, and also the water. He felt a rasp of exasperation in his body, an awareness of his weakness as well as a frenetic reaction against himself. His blood boiled in fury that he had fallen so low as to accept a lot which deprived him even of the privilege of possessing his own bullocks and his own plough. And it was all because of Buta. That raw-hearted fellow had a pair of bullocks and a plough which he shared with another sardar. But he would not lend his compatriot the use of it.

Gangu understood the reason for this refusal. The small patch of land which he was now digging was strip off Buta's holding. But then, the right, Gangu felt, was on his side, for had not Buta acquired his three acres by usurping the plots of land given by contract to the coolies whom he brought to the plantation, and by favouritism?

The fox put on such a cunning style of talk, speaking of how his conscience hurt him, that he had not done enough for his compatriot, that he thought of feasting the Brahmins soon, on the death anniversary of his father, and how he felt sad at the death of Sajani. And he had wept like a hypocrite, as he would at the sight of a mouse caught in a trap. While, if it had not been for the Dr. Sahib, Gangu knew he could not have got his patch.

And he felt he should never talk to Buta again, for the deceit the Sardar had practised on him from the time he began to talk glibly of the wonderful life on the tea plantation in the village, throughout the journey till their arrival here.

'The liar,' Gangu burst forth, 'he killed my Sajani with his lies! She was unhappy from the very moment she arrived here, though she didn't say so, because she did not want to hurt me. And then she took my illness and died.'

He felt choked in his throat with the memory of his wife, and his eyes filled with water. And in his heart there was a slow saturation of resentment that pervaded and enfolded his being till he stood face to face with the cruel pain of the destiny of which Buta was the instrument.

'Why, the man was so standoffish when the Sahib

ordered him to give me a bit of his land. And this patch can hardly be more than two-fifths of an acre, otherwise, I would not have been able to furrow it in an afternoon—with a silly spade that couldn't scratch a woman's back if she had the itch. But there are only three more furrows left to make, although, of course, I could certainly have done it in half an hour if the faithless cur had lent me him plough.'

He looked up to the coolie lines, five hundred yards away on the slope, irritated by the sweat that besmeared his body. And he blew a hot breath both to adjust his respiration and to discharge all the hatred and anger that rose from his belly.

He became conscious of the cool breeze that came from the gorging river, past boulders and rocks, through the wooden bridge on the road, whispering to the grass. He closed his eyes dreamily and cast the long range of his glance up to the dark-alleyed pathways disappearing in a miraged harvest of tea, as if he were looking for news of the earth.

Then he saw his son, Buddhu, with a group of other boys, covered all over with mud, playing 'You be the horse, I'll be the rider' and shouting boisterously.

'That is good,' he mused indulgently, 'he will forget about his mother.'

And he cast his eyes across the valley at the foot of the tea-covered slopes. The plot of land given to the coolies for cultivating rice began just about there. The tender young shoots of the paddy were already coming out. And he realized that he was late by a month in sowing the seed. Like a stumbling reaper who spills the harvest in his dreams, he cast a weary

glance at the wild lilies and irises that grew on the edge of his little bit of land, and beyond, at the seared, scarred overgrowths of bamboo clumps and trees and bushes, which had not yet yielded nature's secret. A burly sahib from some other plantation stood there, fixed like the root of a dead tree, casting an oppressive shadow on the silence.

Gangu bent down to his spade.

'Hum, Hum, Ho, Hum,' he involuntarily breathed as he dug, and he repeated the stroke with unfailing regularity. And he felt as if he were singing a song like one of the old songs he used to sing as he furrowed his land in the Hoshiarpur hills.

But the 'Hum-Hum-Ho' mingled with a 'huff-huff-huff,' and the song seemed to lapse out of tune, till a harsh grating sigh of fatigue emphasized itself, and with a whiff and a phew, and a blow of the spittle, it came to an end. Gangu's back ached. He stood again to rest himself. He wished Leila were there to fill up his hookah.

He looked across the coolie lines and wondered what the girl was doing. She never said anything. She was shy, like the dawn on some hill of mystery. And she had so much to do since her mother died; plucking and cooking and sweeping and dusting and fetching water.

But there, there above the terraces of the rice-fields there she was. And he opened his dim eyes to explore the banks of the stream. She had a pitcher under her arm. As dutiful as she was beautiful—she was running, eager, young and eager. And now she had put the pitcher down and walked into the water to bathe. There were other women there, to judge from those

splashings. 'Let them have their fun,' he said. 'They are at home in the water, much more at home than men.'

He recalled that he had seldom swum in the water for years or played about in it. He had his dip and came out. 'Surely,' he thought to himself, 'there is something of the water about a woman. Flowing, always flowing, one way or another, and restless like the waves, sometimes overwhelmingly moody, fickle and capricious as a river in storm, sometimes bright and smiling, sometimes soft and sad, but always tender and kind. But may she live long, my little Leila. She is a blessing. She is Sajani's gift to me, to tend me in my old age.'

He surveyed the whole world of the valley, the ridges crested by the Sahib's bungalows, the slopes covered with gold-tipped tea parted by dark paths and gulleys, the black cottage roofs of the coolie lines, the green patches of the rice land, the wild flowers and the tops of the bamboo clumps, all lying on either side of the river, now coloured amber by the falling sun.

He had a sudden comprehension of this world, and a tearless love for everything in it. He gripped the handle of his spade with an unwavering faith and dug his foot into the sod made by a furrow, and sensed the warm freshness of the earth that would yield fruit.

In the white emptiness of his mind there was the sudden pulsation of a wild urge to live. He shook his head and swerved round as if to cast the pallid roll of a desolate sky that hovered over his brain, as it to straighten the curve of his soul dented by the sharp

edges of time, as if to throw aside the weight of his persecuted, shrunken resignation.

And he rose with a faint elation, heaving his spade and scattering mud and clay aside. Rapt in the glow of this sunlit beauty, he felt happy in his meek and simple soul, and the earth bared its subterranean passages in vast surges, as if it was bursting with the desire of centuries.

But the shadow of the Sahib who still stood fishing by the bank of the stream cast its terror of white firmness across his thoughts.

11

'THE Sahib is coming ! The Sahib is coming ! ' called Shashi Bhushan's young servant, Ramu, as he saw de la Havre approaching the bypath where he himself stood playing with the Babu's little children.

There was a shuffling of forms behind the sack-cloth curtain at the door. The nose of an old woman peered out of a big rent and an outline of her head was visible, hooded in the folds of the upper part of her dhoti.

De la Havre noticed the shouting and the shuffling. He could not suppress a grin at the thought of the modesty which was so busily protecting itself in shrouds in Shashi Bhushan's dwelling place, whose four walls already stood firm, sacrificing a wonderful view of the valley to the considerations of privacy. But he took this for granted. The 'high class' Indian households in the plains observed purdah. And, since Shashi Bhushan was a clerk who talked English, wore trousers, while his cotton jacket was tucked inside the trousers, boasted a starched shirt, collar and necktie, and was a man with a certain amount of prestige in the eyes of the sahibs, he had pretensions to a superior position over the coolies and the warders. He liked to be considered a 'high class' man. Of course, his household would observe purdah.

De la Havre had never been inside a 'high class' Indian household, not even at Jhelum, where he had spent a year in the I.M.S., within a stone's throw of the house of Subedar Major Khan Bahadur Ilm Din, chief Indian doctor at the station hospital there. But Ilm Din was a Muhammadan whose household would have observed purdah even if it had not been 'high class.' It was impossible to probe its mysteries.

Shashi Bhushan, being a Bengali Hindu, might be less strict. But de la Havre felt quite thrilled to be actually going to the 'high class' household on the plantation. So far he had only visited the houses of the sahibs and the huts of the coolies, which were poles apart. His assistant, Dr. Chuni Lal, the only other 'high class' Indian on the estate, was a bachelor, and lived in a room at the dispensary, which was little different from his own study, except that some lurid water colours by Bengali painters decorated its wall.

The thick sack-cloth curtain sagging with the weight of the rainwater that had drenched it, gathered into another knot as he approached. There was a sound of muffled shouts, and loud whispers, and a fluttering of forms behind it.

De la Havre came up briskly, eager to know how his arrival was being heralded. He had to inspect Shashi Bhushan's wife who was expecting a child. And he was feeling rather tense.

As he reached the door, the hooded figure which had poked its nose through the rent in the sacking cried 'hai, hai,' and ran back across the small courtyard and into the inner chambers.

Normally de la Havre would have lifted the curtain

and announced his arrival by rattling the latch on the open door, but the increased muffling and shuffling and ruffling restrained him.

He stood for a moment, awkward and embarrassed, looking around at the droppings of the hens on the edge of a drain which emptied the dirty water of the house into an old Burma Oil Company tin, lower down the hill.

Then he raised his eyes to scan the slow gradations of the luxuriant masses of tea-bush which reached on all sides to the indigo ranges of the Himalayas, and the purple rim of the sky. There was a queer dry sulphurous smell in the air, and he began to tap his feet on the edge of a boulder impatiently.

'Koi hai,' he called.

There was a loud exchange of gibberish, out of which emerged Shashi Bhushan's voice, on a final triumphant note. And then Shashi Bhushan's form stood in the doorway.

'Good evening, sir,' the Babu said, twisting his face as he smiled in abject apology. 'Sorry, sir. The servant boy will bring the chair.'

Indeed Ramu had already appeared holding a basket chair on his head. He advanced from behind Shashi Bhushan, but as the Babu was all attention to the Sahib, he did not notice it till the boy bashed into his backside.

'How is your wife?' asked de la Havre, sensing behind Shashi Bhushan's manner the terror and the insane distress of a man possessed by the will to please and by the knowledge that he could not.

'Sir, the *dai* (maternity nurse) says that the baby will

come in two or three hours,' replied Shashi Bhushan. 'She is by the side of the patient all the time.'

'Is she a qualified nurse?' asked de la Havre.

If not, he surmised, then either Shashi Bhushan, his wife, or the nurse, or possibly both the women would be against his attending the case. That was probably why Shashi Bhushan had taken so long coming to the door. And the ruffling, the shuffling and the muffling that was still going on in the inner chamber was significant. He had heard that 'high class' Indian women, unlike 'high class' European women did not want to be delivered by a male doctor.

'Yes, sir, she was present at the birth of my two other children.'

De la Havre did not know whether he should insist on seeing the patient or go away with good grace, since it was quite obvious from Shashi Bhushan's tone that he was not wanted. Perhaps the Indian *dais* were all right, in spite of all that was said about them. But then curiosity and a sense of duty prevailed. He really ought to see the patient at least.

'Won't you sit down, sir,' said Shashi Bhushan, 'the servant is making some tea, and we have a special sweet which we distribute on the occasion of birth ceremonies.'

'Thanks, I will eat the sweets after,' said de la Havre, 'but I would like to examine Mrs. Bhattacharya.'

'Sir,' said Shashi Bhushan, quivering on the horns of a dilemma, 'Sir, I am sorry, sir, that my house is in disorder.'

But de la Havre's glance was too direct for Shashi Bhushan to contradict. He lowered his head and prompted by the innate courtesy which his long service with the sahibs had mixed with obsequiousness, he raised the curtain for de la Havre to enter.

At once there was a shriek from inside and de la Havre felt guilty. Rather than do any good, his visit might make the patient's condition worse.

But then he saw that it was the Indian nurse who was raising the alarm. She had come out of the inner chamber and stood in the small veranda by the open-air kitchen shouting in Bengali, and flinging her arms in the air.

Shashi Bhushan abused the woman and brushed her aside. And de la Havre entered, polluting the kitchen and the house, as he well knew, but grimly determined to see things for himself.

The pungent smell of some burning medicine lay wrapped in coils of thin smoke across the crowded room, obscuring the contour of things. The smallest of Shashi Bhushan's children began to cry as de la Havre entered, while the other one ran about like a rat.

'It is the ceremonial sacred thup smell, sir,' said Shashi Bhushan. 'The old *dai* is very superstitious. She insists on burning it.'

De la Havre had smelt this heavy aroma once before at a reception in the house of the theosophical Lady Lutyens, but that did not prevent him from feeling sick, just as he had done in the house off Wigmore Street. He stood at the doorway with his hat in his hand, looking through the waves of smoke for the patient. As his eyes pierced the vague atmos-

phere, he saw the bed on one side, but not the patient.

'My wife is very shy, sir,' ventured Shashi Bhushan from behind him.

De la Havre could have cursed foully. But he suddenly espied the form of the woman sitting shrouded at the head of the bed, with only one side of the delicate tracing of her pale face glimmering through the half-light. She seemed like a frightened young doe, clear and still, remotely near. And he saw and heard her breathe, saw through her clinging draperies to the nervous trepidation of her palpitating body, the fear imposed by men, a fear that had become a shame in her. He tried to conquer his disgust, but he could not. He was angry with himself for having intruded, and still angrier with the stupid conventions of these people. He veered round and hurried out of the room.

'Don't trouble her,' he said abruptly. 'Let her rest, and call me in case of trouble. Or perhaps you will just let me come in when the labour begins, so that I am near at hand if need be.'

'Yes, sir, yes, sir,' said Shashi Bhushan.

And then he became quiet as if he had tied up his thoughts in a knot, never to be untied. This was what was so infuriating about the Indians. This sudden silence of Shashi Bhushan's after his abject volubility, enraged de la Havre more than anything else.

'All right, Salaam,' he said, as they reached the door, and lifting the sacking gingerly, he rushed away from the blistered walls.

Day and night were mingling beyond the curves of

space, and the dithyramb of a beetle's cry reverberated through the valley.

Superstition dies hard, he said to himself, as he walked along, and he felt chagrined with the world. Then, almost involuntarily, he began to debate with himself. Was there not some meaning in the custom of burning thup? Most of the mediæval superstitions which had survived had had a sound basis originally. There was the practice of unlacing boots and then lacing them again as a preventive for cold, for instance. It did succeed to some extent in stimulating the circulation of the blood to regions where the cold germs had attached themselves to the body. But all the same, he hated it all, especially these Indian superstitions. Such practices would always give the English a chance to cavil at the Indians. And it weakened his defence of them.

Not that Shashi Bhushan was to be taken as a norm. Most of the coolies were simple enough, and they were possessed of a strange natural dignity, when they did not have to cringe. But the Babu had become contemptible through having to cringe all the time.

If only the British had begun by accepting these people from the very start on terms of equality, as human beings, he said, unconsciously assuming that the worthiness of Indians in the eyes of the English was the only road to salvation. But there it was, the British had exaggerated the worst instinct in their own character, and called out the worst in the Indian.

Before the tabernacle of his subliminal consciousness, he could understand how it all happened, he believed. In England, the ears of the average man

were full of contending factions, and the differences of individual character emerged clearly among men and women. But coming away from 'home,' seeing the ships of their country sail the seas, touching their foreign possessions, the same men and women remembered the pioneers who had gone abroad and conquered the world for them. And they were filled with the dream of English greatness. And the dream of English greatness worked on the already dormant pride of race, and on the proud hearts nourished on legends of T. E. Lawrence, Kipling and the *Boys' Own Paper*. And the kindly, grey, neutral character, gentle and sensitive at 'home' began to attach a different meaning to the theory of the equality of all men.

There were a few Indian students at the universities 'at home.' They were accepted as guests, even considered superior to the negroes because they were not so black, though of course they were 'different' you know. And curiosity and hospitality sometimes even led to their being lionized. But they were really harmless, and did not compete for employment. It was quite different as soon as there was a question of competition. When Indian doctors began to enter the I.M.S., the General Medical Council had seen to it that certain restrictions were imposed. The British would brook no competition whether the competitor was a Frenchman, a Spaniard or a dirty Jew. Still, there at least was the air of equality of privilege for everybody 'at home'—'Fair play and justice and all the traditional English virtues.' But long before the P. and O. steamer reached Bombay, the English realized that for various reasons they

could not treat the natives as equal.

They belonged to a strong race, with its own customs and standards. How could they accept a complete equality with all the races of this continent? They had little imagination and few ideas—most of their beliefs being prejudices. But they definitely had their own customs and conventions. And the customs and conventions of the natives were different.

They made no attempt at a reconciliation. The Indians might ape them. But they were damned if they were going to take their orders from anyone, or go native. De la Havre knew by now what it was to break caste. He knew that ineradicable race pride of the English, because he himself had shared it. And now he was ostracized, because he had flouted the anathemas, because he had acted unconventionally in a world where the hold of convention was most rigid.

The lean fangs of a breeze licked the sweat on his neck and his face, but he did not raise his bowed head, and he walked on wondering how much of Shashi Bhushan's fear was due to Croft-Cooke's bullying. It was generally the way of the world to make a man poor, reduce him in his own estimation, and then say he was dirty and obsequious.

But he still was not satisfied. 'Bengalis can't be trusted,' Macara had once said. 'They are courteous and friendly when all is well, but in time of trouble, they break down like thin reeds.' That was it, the pride of race again. 'Bengalis can't be trusted, but Englishmen can.'

And he recalled the remarks of an English professor, Charles Davy, who had once been his fellow-

traveller on one of his journeys across the peninsula, about the feebleness of the native races. De la Havre had not agreed with his views, and had cited the example of the stalwart Punjab peasant. He had tried to rebuff the diffusionist theory, as well as the Aryan myth by showing that biologically there was no pure race, and that they were all half-castes. But it was obvious why his fellow-traveller would not accept his contention. The prestige of the Englishman in India could only be kept up by associating strength and wisdom and justice with the English as a superior race. And, ostensibly, they would use that fiction to guard themselves against a possible mutiny.

And quite apart from all that, the English were nervy here, because they were completely isolated from the swarming millions around them. They were afraid, afraid, that was it, afraid. Their fear became an inverted bullying.

'It's curious, but that's the way it works,' he said to himself, as this truism were a sudden revelation. And this pride of race, pride of country, and this exaggerated love of home were in the interests of economic supremacy. And all for the lack of a little human understanding. He felt impatient with his thoughts. He had gone over it all, again and again, before, and he felt weary of the whole business.

But he stumbled on the edge of a vague wonder. Was he chagrined about his own effort at accepting Shashi Bhushan? And with a natural egotism and kindness to himself, he was going to find a pretext to explain away his failure.

'Sahib, Sahib,' came a hoarse voice behind him. He stopped suddenly, looked back and saw Shashi

Bhushan running down towards him with a hurricane lamp in his hand, shouting, 'Sahib, the child has appeared.'

De la Havre retraced his steps towards Shashi Bhushan's house with a grunt and a nod. . . .

12

'Mother, O Mother
O my mother
Whenever the memory of you comes to me
There is a sudden pain in my heart...'

Leila sang as she walked into the forest gathering fuel for the hearth fires of her father's home. She had sung snatches of other songs as she had issued out of the coolie lines, songs which she had heard in her village during her childhood, but she had dropped them almost as abruptly as she had begun them. This refrain from a folk song, however, had stayed in her throat. It was choking her, but she crooned:

'Mother, O Mother.'

The tune affected her as the simple sentiment in it touched the only thing she now felt about her mother. She had wept bitterly when Sajani died, she had cried for days as each little thing she did in the house which her mother had done before, reminded her of the fact that her mother was no more; but now all the associations which recalled that presence had faded, and only a vague gap remained, traced by a lingering regret that was speechless, except in a bare statement as in the words of this song.

'Mother, O Mother'.

she persisted and walked on, absorbed in herself and

seeing, though not noticing, the deserted pathway which she had taken by the planter's great house, at the far end of the rolling green of the tea-covered hills. A dim haze with the smell of afternoon lingered over the shadows of the jungle.

The scythe in her right hand glinted sharp, angry glances at the grisly rustle of the breeze that swept the grasses, the shrubs, the shoots, the dead leaves, the gnarled roots, the branches and the creepers which infested the undergrowth.

A sharp sweep of wind that suddenly brushed the slow-hissing breeze aside made her start.

She hesitated for a moment and looked furtively around, afraid of the ghosts, ghouls and hobgoblins that the talk of the lines had built up in her imagination.

The uncanny, eerie atmosphere of the forest grew on her more intensely during that moment, for the damp, turbid smell of the sunless groves, the monotonous sound of the whining bees, beetles, frogs, toads and all the invisible, elusive insects which teemed in the underworld, and the density of the intricate, intimate, vast, unending foliage, all mingled together like a dark oppression and swamped the bright points of resistance in her brain.

But she proceeded, pale and tense, with the dew of fear and the humid air on her body and tried to forget herself in the zoom of the drowsy leafage. And to conduce herself to this unconsciousness, she sought for another snatch of a song.

'Two, three things came to my mind to tell him

But I completely forgot all that I had to say when I was
in his presence,

O my sister, all my tenderest wishings remained in my heart,'

the first verse of a love song came to her tongue. But, as she finished reciting it, it seemed to intensify her loneliness. So she dropped it and hurriedly applied her scythe to the dry branches of a shrub that stood under the shadow of a tall fir.

As she became absorbed in hacking the twigs within the reach of her glinting weapon, her senses were obliterated by the desperate swish of the scythe to a kind of odorous darkness as in a dream.

A starling of the skies over the rugged hills of her village home lit her brain for a while, then a passing vision of faces that she had seen only the other day, dark brown and soft and glistening with the oil of work.

And then her mind was a maze in which the mists of forgetfulness struggled against the leaves and the boughs that stood before her broad eyes.

Out of this air, however, arose a blissful, solemn thought, the translation of the memory of her mother. And she felt as if she could see the warm presence of Sajani close to her.

The shadowy image defined itself into a mask that stared with eyes of love on Leila's sad soul, and seemed to say, 'Never mind, my beautiful, you will be happy. I have told your father to betrothe you and you will soon be married and go to your husband's home. But mind you look after your old father and your little brother, now that I am no more.'

Leila dared not look up to the image which had now assumed a cold, remote expression, but she felt at the same time as her mother were pressing her to

her bosom in a last embrace.

She smiled a half-nervous, half-happy smile, hoping the form of her mother would disappear altogether from the range of her awareness, and she slashed at the dry roots before her with redoubled intensity.

'Every night she comes to me,' she said to herself, even as she faced the reflection of the form against her head. And she recalled how last night her mother's image had laughed merrily with the vibration of light itself, as it had lain wrapped in a red shroud adorned with specks of golden stars, and how the laughter had suddenly become a ray of lightning which had first illuminated the whole sky dazzlingly and then plunged into the earth after a rippling flash, tearing the world so that her mother disappeared and left her standing, arms outstretched, embracing the air. Then she had awakened with a start and found herself starting at the copper-coloured leaves of the banyan, waxing yellow with the rays of scarlet that issued from the angry morning sun. And she had felt sad and forlorn all day in consequence. But now, now her mother's visitation disturbed her. . . .

She shook herself, and stopping to breathe, looked around and dispelled the shadow.

She began to gather the dry sticks that had fallen to her scythe, over a thick string that she had brought from home to tie the fuel with. The boughs were difficult to collect into an orderly heap and she shuffled them, arranged them, and then tied the knot.

As she was going to lift the bundle of twigs, she saw a thick branch lying at the base of an adjacent

fir. That would smoulder away in the hearth for a whole day, she thought, and she would not need to hurt her eyes by blowing at the fuel. She went towards it.

The narcotic smell of wild roses surged up to her nostrils, and as she went along, she looked aside to see if there was a flower bush near.

She leaned across the boughs, and found herself coiled in the grasp of a python that wound itself round the tree.

She was dumb with terror, for a moment. And only the creepers and wreath of the nearby bushes hung low over her eyes.

Then she felt the sweat pour down over her forehead and her heart palpitated with a terrible sense of fatality. She felt she was dying.

But after the loss of a breath, she found her will rigidly in control of her life, though her body shook and trembled as if it were possessed by an ague.

As she stood thus paralysed, a sudden impulse to get free arose in her mind. At all costs she must not die. And she writhed with a terrible aspiration of the spirit. But in the flooding hush of the fast-gathering darkness, she writhed and wriggled in vain. Her face twisted and her body contorted, and she felt consumed by the sinuous warmth that this furious activity sent rippling up to her head. It seemed that she would never be able to extricate herself from the snake's terrible embrace, and she cried. But the tears would not come to her eyes and her voice was choked.

The pain, the fear and the horror of death became a one-pointed dagger over her head, and she began

to count the moments of her remaining life with the utterest, the most desperate, resignation. At some invisible end of its long body, the python was hissing in sudden spurts of breath, the messenger of a death which seemed enshrined in every scale of its foul, poisonous body .

Leila screamed a wild, shrill scream. But her will was almost stifled by the pressure of the deadly reptile.

The cry resounded back with the monotonous, metallic notes of a cockroach. She was going to close her eyes and accept the insidious darkness of sleep that weighed heavily over her eyelids.

Through the gathering force of the snake's coils round her body, she felt her right hand hang limply by her side. She raised it from the forearm with a sudden deliberation and pressed the scythe upwards. The sharp blade of the instrument bruised the python and it tightened its grasp on her.

The feel of a drop of warm blood which fell on her bare toe urged her to saw. The rotund snake wriggled and almost crushed her ribs.

A last, involuntary, desperate stroke of her hand miraculously cut its body into two.

She struggled out of the coils of the horror with a fierce force, and ran to the place where she had put her bundle of sticks.

She was possessed still by the fear of the snake round her, a terrible sharp fear, which rooted her to the earth.

But with a grim determination not to return home empty-handed, she lifted the bundle on her head and darted towards the pathway by which she had

come.

Her heart drummed against her breast, till its thump, thump, was the only sound that stretched before her limited horizon. . . .

As she reached the outskirts of the forest, she began to notice the crackling of the dry leaves under her feet. She slowed down. But the round volume of a sound which seemed like a tiger's growl set her running again, and she did not stop till she had reached the lines.

'There is blood on your scythe,' said Gangu angrily, as she got to the hut. 'Did you cut yourself? And where have you been eating the dirt so long?'

Leila stared at him for a moment, as if from another world, veered with a sudden dizziness, and fell in a faint. . . .

13

'GONE to sleep, brother Gangu?' called Narain, coming towards his neighbour's hut after his evening meal.

'No, brother,' said Gangu, wearily, puffing at his cocoanut-shell hookah, as he sat on his charpai where Buddhu snored. He had not been very communicative since his wife's death, and Leila's narrow escape from the coils of the python the other day had exaggerated his solemnity. Besides, the humid heat of the midsummer night stood before his eyes, tier upon tier, from the valley up to the heavens, like heavy strata of dull, white mist on which the multitudinous stars dissipated their brightness.

'We liked the tamarind pickle you sent us,' said Narain, to start a conversation. 'Do you always eat your rice with pickles then, in the North?'

'Aye,' said Gangu. 'It is very good for you. It cures bile.'

There was a moment of silence between them, during which the myriad forms of the jungle far away seemed to move in the viscid air and proclaim their suzerainty over the night.

'The ghosts will keep a vigil to-night,' said Narain, sitting down at the edge of the charpai, 'as they will celebrate the coming of Mahadev among them—you know Mahadev, the coolie who lived in number two

line was found dead in that bare plot near which your wife and daughter worked when you came here. They say he committed suicide by hanging himself by his dhoti from that tree, but I believe that it was the vengeance of the goddess Kali.'

'But I saw him hale and hearty yesterday,' said Gangu with a start.

'Yes, so did you see your wife in perfect health the day before she died,' said Narain. 'And she died exactly as he died, after having trespassed on that bare spot. Do you not know that that spot has been left unplanted even by the sahibs?'

'Why is it so then?' asked Gangu, yielding more to curiosity than to belief.

'It is left unplanted for a reason,' began Narain, glad of a chance to give free rein to his fancy. 'During the many years that I have been here, they have tried to sow it five times, but the plant dies as soon as it is born. Because, in the olden days, when the Assam kings ruled, there used to be a temple of the goddess Kali here, and they used to sacrifice goats and sometimes even human beings before the shrine on which stood a marvellous image of her, carved entirely in gold, with a huge pit in its stomach.'

'When the sahibs came to Assam, and persuaded the king of this land not to offer human beings for sacrifice, the goddess appeared to the priest one night, in a dream, crying "I am hungry, I am hungry. I must have blood."

'The Sahib log assumed the raj of Assam and they cleared the jungle to start tea plantations. But, as they say, when they tried to plant tea on the spot where the shrine of Kali was, the tea wouldn't grow

and everyone who walks on the patch dies.

'And it is told that every year on the Durga Puja day, the goddess appears at night, howling and shrieking vengeance on the land and always on that day there is a fierce storm of wind and rain, till someone is struck dead by the lightning and the goddess's wrath appeased.'

'But Mahadev the coolie didn't die on the Durga Puja day,' said Gangu, 'and my wife passed away a month before.'

'Who knows by what means the goddesses bring about their ends, what time they choose and what space for the exercise of their will?' said Narain, lowering his voice, histrionically.

But Gangu knew. For he had been an eye witness of the quarrel between Mahadev and the wife of Goswami.

She had called aloud to Mahadev and said : 'Oh, thy wicked son of an imp is a thief, because I have caught him red-handed stealing one of my best chickens.'

Mahadev, who loved his son, had abused her, calling her 'the wife of a hundred husbands,' and 'the daughter of a shameless mother,' and had repudiated the charge.

Thereupon Goswami had come out and hit Mahadev for abusing his wife, and there had been an alarm. The sardars had taken the lot of them to the Sahib. And as several witnesses had corroborated the story of Goswami's wife, the Sahib had persuaded Mahadev to offer Goswami the price of the chicken.

Mahadev had paid the money. But he had taken the fact of his son being proved a thief very much

heart and committed suicide.

Gangu remained silent and yielded to an egoism which the surroundings encouraged. He could hear some of the coolies talking over hookahs in little groups, some coughing, some spitting, some groaning, some snoring, and he became possessed of a strange weariness.

'Each one is happy or miserable in his own skin,' he muttered to himself in a voice which was loud enough for Narain's ears. 'And I can only see my own suffering.'

And he realized that he could not get into contact with anybody for the while, and see their misery.

'Not that I want to shut myself into myself,' he said, and he looked at Narain to make a contact with his neighbour. But he suddenly became aware of a mosquito whining round his ear. He tried to brush it with his hand and was irritated because the little demon escaped and charged him on the nose.

Narain resented Gangu's incredulity for a moment. Then he became conscious of the fact that his neighbour was suffering from a bereavement and could not be expected to be as willing a listener to his yarns as he had been before. For Narain, though good-humoured, bluff, effusive and garrulous, was well-intentioned, and sensitive in the extreme.

'Have you sown the seed in your field for the season?' he asked, changing the topic.

'Yes.' Gangu warmed, because he realized that he had allowed his sorrow to harden him to his friend.

'I only hope,' he continued, 'the rain comes at the proper time. But of course, if wishes could rain, cow-herds would be kings.'

And then he sought to shift the talk from centring round himself. 'What did you do to-day, brother Narain?' asked.

'I went to work on the new road before the bell at six,' said Narain, rather self-pityingly. 'I worked till noon and earned four annas. Then I went back again and worked till dark, earning another four annas. That makes eight annas for the day, because the Sardar cannot cut away wages if you are busy all the time. But the money won't be paid till the end of the month, and my wife has gone and bought a bodice with what money she had left over from the expenses for provisions. Now I will have to ask for an advance from the Sardar. He is not in a good mood. He beat Suleman, the coolie from Jubblepur, for abusing his friend Ibrahim in a joke, to-day.'

Gangu closed his eyes at the mention of the beating. His self-respect and his sense of dignity had been hurt by the kicks he had received from the Manager Sahib. And he did not want to think of that incident because the Rajput in him, who should have retaliated, had been prevented from doing so by the calamity of his wife's death. He could sympathize with Suleman, though he did not know him. He knew how the insult latent in the beating hurt a man more than the actual pain of the blow. And there was something more cruel in the impact of a kick than in all the abuse that was hurled at him. Not that the kicks had bruised his body, stiff and muscular from a lifetime of toil, but it was the humiliation of having always to lower his eyes before the man who had beaten him.

'Didn't he beat back?' he said.

'Oh, no,' said Narain. 'The sardars are favoured people. What they say goes. Look, I have been here so many years. I have not been back to Bikaner once since I came. The sardars have land to cultivate, but I have none. The manager pays the sardar, the sardar pays me what he likes. I want some land. But can I get it forcibly? The manager gives it to the sardars, and we cannot get it from them. The sardars, the babu, the chaprasi, the warders, have all got land. What does the warder do that he should get it? That Neogi Gurkha, who is the Sardar over my wife's work in the garden, has got another five acres. Do you know why?'

'No,' said Gangu.

'Because,' answered Narain, lowering his voice till it was a whisper under his walrus moustache, 'the Ashashtant Planter Sahib likes his wife.'

Gangu felt embarrassed at the possible reasons Narain might have in mind about how he had recently acquired his strip of land. He was conscious that he had a lovely daughter.

'I don't say that everyone gets land by giving his wife, mother or daughter away to the sahibs,' said Narain, dividing Gangu's nervousness, 'But the Reji Sahib is a *budmash* and Neogi had no choice. He would have lost his job and been lashed as Ranbir, the coolie from Ranchi was lashed, because he refused to give his wife to the Ashashtant planter. The Sahib had Ranbir imprisoned, and took his wife. That bitch was living at the bungalow for months, till the Sahib turned her out and sent her back to the lines a few days ago.'

'No blame attaches to her, brother,' said Gangu to

temper Narain's malice. 'She was forced to do what she did.'

'She has got jewellery and fine clothes, brother, Narain said. 'And she has got land.'

'Yes,' said Gangu, understanding the bitterness behind Narain's malice.

'The Ashashtant planter won't give me land,' continued Narain, 'though I have to go down to-morrow to the "cluff" to work on the polo ground. Instead, I might get what you got.'

Gangu knew how his neighbour felt. He had felt the same. And not because he had got land, but because he had suffered a greater pain than the pain of humiliation, he was inclined to forgive.

Also, he had been weakened by life into an accepting character. For working under a torrid sun, sowing, reaping, attending to a hundred different jobs, fighting nature, had taught him patience and endurance, virtues which make for dour hearts but weak wills.

And the religion of fatalism, his faith in which was increased by his knowledge of the inevitability of death, unconsciously inclined him to build a shining ladder between heaven and his lot.

To remain silent, to suffer and to stifle the bitterness of his experience, to forgive, to cut the canker of resentment out of his heart—that was now his innermost instinct.

And so he forgave everyone.

But it was a positive and virile enough way of forgiveness, in view of his submission not to them, but to some higher force of fear in himself.

He was not finding it easy to discipline his instincts,

but he had determined not to let his senses always be conspiring to wreak the only vengeance open to him through the Rajput code—murder.

The world was full of possible friends. He felt comradely towards Narain, for instance, though this man was a perfect stranger to him when he came here.

Forgiveness, therefore, was not fickleness. 'Men with abiding purpose cherish neither hatred nor love,' he had heard the proverb quoted. They forgave lightly. But forgiveness did not mean that they should cease to strive against wrong. Indeed, true forgiveness was a hard battle, than which only one other battle was harder: to be humble and not proud in forgiveness.

'We should forgive,' he said to Narain.

Narain gaped at his friend in astonishment, a red heat throbbing in the temples of his head.

'Thu, thu, dhu, dhut...' the bugle sounded the 'Last Post.'

'You there, Gangu, you there, Narain?' came the warder's call.

'To sleep, brother,' said Narain, 'before the wrath of the watchman bursts upon our talk.'

14

SEATED astride old Tipoo, riding like hell with excitement, waving the long cane stick, chasing the white wooden ball, Reggie Hunt felt grand, playing polo on the Club maidan.

Seated astride old Tipoo, riding like hell with excitement, waving the long cane stick, chasing the white wooden ball, Reggie Hunt felt the blue blood that had been the pride of his youth at school, at Sandhurst and in the Indian Army and was the pride of his manhood now, in spite of all the odds. Cricket was a silly girls' game only fit for nancy boys, in spite of that school song about the Battle of Waterloo having been won on the playing-fields of Eton. Hockey at Camberley was more the splashing of mud than the hitting of a ball, and in the army one was a slave to the whim Colonel's about billiards and miniature golf. Here, at last, was polo, the sport of kings, a real man's game, a pastime which compensated for all the bloody racket of these tea plantations....!

Seated astride old Tipoo, riding like hell with excitement, waving the long cane stick, chasing the white wooden ball, give me a spot of polo and to the devil with all the rest, felt Reggie, as he rushed past Macara's white horse.

The first chukker had been grand. His mount had

been fresh and he himself flushed with all the pent-up enthusiasm of days. And he had scored a goal.

So different from what happened usually. For, after lying awake at night obsessed with excitement of the next day's sport, through the tiring round of work, the slow passage of time after lunch, unrelieved by the desire for the siesta, and through the strain of dressing, he was too tired when he actually entered the field.

But life had been marching at a faster tempo ever since he had told his mind straight out to de la Havre. It seemed that the conflict in the atmosphere had called forth all the dormant reserves of energy in him.

He must avenge the three goals that old Mac's team had debited to his side.

There, there the ball had been snatched up by Hitchcock. Reggie pulled at the reins of his horse till Tippto frothed at the mouth like melted butter.

It was a shame, a bloody shame, he felt. He was the only sound man on his side. That little bugger, Croft-Cooke, could neither ride nor hit the ball. Tweetie was too damned heavy on his horse. And, of course, Afzal, the defender was his bearer, and you could not let him score the goals. The prestige of the white man must not be lowered, and it was a good thing he was playing back.

On the other hand, Hitchcock and Mac combined well, and, in spite of the fact that Ralph was cross-eyed and could not see the goals, he got into your way somehow and made the enemy posts impenetrable.

'But if only I can get the ball past Mac once. . . .'

He sighted the pill fifty yards away from him with Hitchcock behind it. 'Now for it, then,' he said, 'Now for it. I will hit it right up to their goal, right into their goal. Now for it, Tipoo, now for it, before the chukker is up. Now for the goal!'

But Tipoo gave a snort, as if to say she was tired, whinnied with self-pity, and slowed her pace.

'Come along, come along,' hissed Reggie, digging his heels into the mare, and as she lunged forward and ran headlong for a moment, he leaned upon her neck with his face taut, his blood boiling and his whole body absorbed in the sheer, shrill ecstasy of power into which he always worked himself, his mind a pure blank except for the glow of chivalry that cast a warm, rich, golden exhilaration across it.

Tipoo could not keep up the fast pace into which she had parked at the dig in her belly and forgetful of the last spasm of pain she had felt and blind to the invincible predestination of fresh thrusts, she slowed just before the shadow of Hitchcock's horse raced round from the right, and galloped clear out of Reggie's way with the ball.

'Hell!' Reggie cursed as, chagrined and frustrated, he dug his heels furiously into Tipoo's side and punished her by pulling at the bit in her mouth. The mare described a semicircle of resentment, and with a vision sharpened by the heat of the day, roused her nerves to the rigidity of opposition and challenged her master with an utter refusal to go. The wildest pony could not have frightened Reggie Hunt as did this sudden attitude on the part of the ordinarily docile Tipoo.

'Come then, you fool,' he said under his breath,

and as if Tipoo felt the grim weight of a more determined stubbornness than her own on her spine, she fell in with the command.

The sweat was pouring down Reggie's body and nothing existed in his brain save the sudden whirls of malevolence, that rose into his forehead from some past thwartings, like towers on the hills, illuminated by the thunders of his present hate, and mingling like the wind in a gale caught in the prison of space. He was blind for a moment and rode along utterly dazed.

Then he sighted the ball a hundred yards away and turned towards it. Ralph was close behind the white pill.

'Afzal, Afzal!' he cried, 'run for it. Damn you, run! Blast you, run!'

But before Afzal could run, Ralph, in spite of his cross eyes, hooked the ball from before Croft-Cooke's nose, and scored another goal to the debit of Reggie's side.

'Oh, God!' he gave a last wail of despair. 'Four goals to one!' he muttered under his breath. 'And it was all the fault of that bald-headed little bastard, Croft-Cooke.'

He pulled in the reins of his horse, fuming and savage with a suppressed rage. The sound of sharp clapping fell into his ears, and increased his anger. He looked towards the edge of the ground where Mrs. Macara, Mrs. Croft-Cooke, and the wife of Smith, the policeman, sat in the shadow of the huge buffet tent.

'To hell with the bitches!' he said, and explored the background of the pavilion to see if the club

khansamah had laid the tables.

A whiff of thin air fell soft and nimble on his face, and he saw the sun shadowed behind the elms. He breathed a large draught of the air, and felt a queer ferment in his blood, and through the rubbings of the saddle, a stirring in his loins such as had always led his senses tingling with desire towards the image of a woman's body, naked at the haunches, and waiting for the attack.

He wished the match were over. He felt he could rush home and jump on to her, just jump on to her and tear her parting.

His face flushed at the thought of this wild happiness and his eyes were half-closed deliriously.

'Reggie boy!' shouted Ralph, 'Afzal is going to hit off.'

Reggie came to.

'One last try,' he said to himself, and he stirred his horse into alertness. But there was time for him to get into position, for the coolie who had run to fetch the white wooden ball had thrown it short of Afzal's range.

As he waited tense and expectant, knowing that Afzal would hit the ball towards him, Tipoo pulled at her bit and sheered round with a startling suddenness that frightened Reggie's heart.

'What the hell is the matter with this bitch to-day?' he wondered, as he struck the mare's rump with his polo stick.

Tipoo arched her all-coloured eyes and neighed defiance to the shadow that weighed her down. Reggie felt a tremor of irritation go through him and he felt unequal to the heights of his ambition and

pride.

'Huzoor, ball aya!' shouted Afzal.

Reggie dug into the flanks of his mare—the signal for a gallop, and pulled the rein on the right. Tipoo shook indecisively for a moment. Reggie raised his long stick before her face and bullied her, and struck her flanks with redoubled vigour. Tipoo was cowed. She darted towards the pill with a calculated leap. Reggie received the ball on the blade of his stick before Hitchcock charged at him. He dribbled it between the legs of Ralph's mare, and caught it fifty yards away from Macara.

'Now to do or die', the thought throbbed in his forehead. And the warm glow of firm purpose swept through him like the voice of many winds, making him lift his rump off the saddle as if he were soaring in the air. Someone was hard on his heels to intercept the progress of his mare. He struck the pill hard, so that it volleyed through the opposite goal.

'Bravo, Reggie! Bravo!' shouted Croft-Cooke.

'Well done, boy!' even old Macara complimented him as he turned back from where he had reined in his horse.

And there was the sound of discreet cheering from the pavilion.

Reggie hung his head down with self-consciousness. He was not quite sure in himself of his accomplishment, and though he did not want anyone to think it was a fluke, he himself wondered how he had done it at all.

'Good, Reggie', complimented Tweetie. 'Let's get another before the last few chukkers are up.'

'Come then, boys', shouted Croft-Cooke, suddenly

inspired into the right feeling for captaincy.

This time, the coolie who was the linesman got the straying ball and threw it to the Sahib with more alacrity.

'Mark your man, Ralph,' shouted Macara.

Reggie felt elated to think that he was being regarded as a menace who must be attended to more particularly than any other member of his team. He got ready to hook the ball. He must dodge Hitchcock, he felt. So he pulled the reins of his mare sideways.

But Tipoo refused to budge, only lifting her forelegs and shaking her rider. Reggie dug his heels into her with a fierceness that almost cramped his shins under the long riding-boots. Tipoo whinnied and neighed and tossed the hair on her mane, and stood firmly rooted to the ground as if she were a solid oak, waving its branches in utter disregard of the constellation blazing and blotting out over her head and the earth crumbling into the void around her. Reggie threatened her with his stick. Tipoo was afraid of that, and she moved before its shadow, but she described a semicircle as if to see what it was about, the stick that frightened her so. And then, having seen it to be nothing but the familiar long cane with a stump of wood at its base, she determined not to be daunted.

She gave a sudden snort and made tracks for home.

Reggie struggled. Reggie shifted. Reggie strained. Reggie cursed and swore. Reggie pressed his will for all the force, all the power, all the glory with which he had crammed it. Reggie pressed his heart for the hardness of which he had thought it capable. Reggie

pressed his head for all the stratagems, all the devices which he had believed it could evolve. Reggie dug his heels into the belly of his mare. Reggie struck her flanks, her rump and her legs. Reggie bled her with the butt end of his polo stick, but Reggie could not control her beyond keeping her somewhere near the ground.

For Tipoo galloped as if she heard the song of the wind in her ears. She swayed like a hurricane sweeping across the open plain. She flashed like lightning and neighed like thunder. She surged up and down with all the stubbornness and obstinacy that the constant pulling of the bit in her mouth had produced in her. She rocked like a mountain torn and split by a sudden earthquake. She opened her red eyes and shed hot tears of anger. She frothed big white globules of froth from her mouth, and she refused to play.

Reggie felt that his arms were being pulled out as he tried to keep a grip on the mare. He felt the muscles of his biceps and triceps aching in the tug of war. Above all he felt his pride, the pride of the expert rider who had laughed at the uneasy horsemen of the Assam plantations, humbled by this uncanny show of resistance that his mare was offering.

He had never known the long-drawn-out agony of such a seven minutes. To be on the ground, within sight of the game and to be disobeyed by one's own horse and thus to be prevented from play.

But when would the gong strike and the chukker finish?

Tipoo was jerking in her gallop towards the

tennis-courts. The groom was running towards him. He thought he should avoid dismounting and pulled the turbulent horse aside, exerting all his strength.

The mare shot forth like a bullet into the polo ground. Here was his chance, Reggie felt. Perhaps he could control her. There old Croft-Cooke was trying to hit the ball. But as he rushed towards him, he saw that the old man's hit was a failure. The ball did not travel further than twenty yards, and Hitchcock had it before Afzal could drive it.

Tweetie was heading for destruction with a voluminous energy, as his horse would come straight into Tipoo's way. Reggie gave free rein to his mare for a moment and cried 'Look out.' Tipoo cleared off a second before Tweetie's mare shaved past her hind legs. Reggie's heart jumped and his eyes swam upon the waves of his unrest. Behind him, however, Tweetie's mare had struck against Croft-Cooke's horse, and both fatty, and the old man had fallen off.

The gong struck.

And as if Tipoo knew that the chukker was up, she surveyed the horizon, described a crescent, ran in a straight conquering line up to the pavilion and stopped still.

'Take her away and drown her,' said Reggie to the groom.

The small prim man with the jet-black face rolled his eyes. He seemed quite concerned about his master. But Reggie Hunt was not sure whether there was a grin on that ugly face as he turned away. 'Bloody fool,' he muttered and went towards the tent. He felt the sweat pour down his body. He pulled the handkerchief out of his breeches pocket

and mopped his face and neck.

Afzal, his bearer, rushed up with his scarf and jacket and helped him into warmth.

The Club khansamah was opening bottles of beer and champagne.

Afzal fetched a tumbler frothing full of beer for his Sahib.

'You ought to shoot that bloody pony dead,' said Macara, coming into the tent.

'He is rather heavy on her,' said Hitchcock. 'We really ought to have more than one pony each for the different chukkers.'

Reggie felt ill at ease at being reminded of the sorry figure he had cut during the last few minutes of the game. His handsome blotched face which always coloured so easily, was diffused with a wild flush at this discomfort. And he became conscious of a queer agitation in his bones, the thrilling exultation of the beer seeping into his body and a nervous lethargy of fatigue and despair. Through the feverish heat of his dizzy brain, however, he could see the twilight falling over the valley and chilling his sense of things and thoughts.

'Afzal,' he said, 'another glass.'

'Yes, Huzoor,' said Afzal, and immediately pushed forward a tray with another large tumbler.

Reggie heard the twittering voices of the women outside the camp approaching. And he felt a whisper in his mind beckoning him away.

He swallowed his drink with halfclosed eyes and, flushed a vivid pink to scarlet from neck to nose, went slowly towards his motor-bicycle.

'Cheerio, Reggie! Cheerio! Cheerio!' the voices of

Ralph, Tweetie and Hitchcock called as he put his cycle into second gear, ran with it, de-clutched and rode away.

The warm breeze struck his face and elated him. Besides, he had a feeling of strength from the steel machine which triumphantly scaled the heights of the road. And there was the surging of a wild, leaping desire in his loins that envenomed his grim, sullen mind with a hot sting, till he felt he were flying with fiery wings to the lap of a crimson cloud.

But he wished he could hurry home at sixty miles an hour. He was impatient for her and could not wait.

The circuitous road prevented speeding, however.

Shaped by the stress of his devouring passion, he cast his hungry, baffled eyes across the hills and turned downcast from the heights to the thin veil of mist that covered the valley. If he could have met a woman here, he would have found it difficult to restrain himself from gutting her against the rock or throwing her into a hollow and jumping on to her. The oppressive urge of his hot, steadfast lust made his head quiver with a palpitating ache, till it became a dumb longing, goading a purblind soul amid the blindness of a cold felicity. His passion had become the image of the act as he would perform it.

He hooted past the coolie lines with a swagger that took point from the ridiculous salaams of the children playing about in the dust. He charged up the drive, shut off the engines sharply, pulled the brakes and pushed the cycle back to its stand.

'Koi hai,' he called cupping his hands to spread his voice to the followers' huts twenty yards away,

so that Neogi's wife should hear wherever she should be.

There was no answer. Only a crowd of chickens fluttered towards a hen-house outside the door of Afzal's hut.

With a sudden deliberation, Reggie walked towards the followers' lines. There was a stirring of warmth in his loins, but his head and heart had been extinguished in a void. He kicked a stone on the way and whistled, then clapped his hands and called aloud 'Koi hai.'

There was no answer.

He approached the door of the hut, which he had given to Neogi's wife to live in, and stood to listen. He would kick Neogi out if he had dared to come up here again as he did the other day. No. There was only Neogi's wife. He struck his fist on the door. The wooden panels yielded.

The woman got up, rubbing her eyes.

'You sleep all day,' he shouted, catching hold of her at the waist.

She did not look up, but still rubbed her swollen eyes.

He passed her hand round her and said: 'Come and take the banana.'

'Nose-ring, bakhshish,' she said, moving her head.

'I will give you money to buy a nose-ring,' he said.

And he squeezed her between the iron girders of his thighs, the solid blocks of his shoulders, till the pyramid of his passion was contiguous to her parting.

'Ooi,' she cried, pain-marred, and afraid of being mutilated.

'Don't wriggle and writhe like that,' he whispered, tearing at the string of her trousers and throwing her down on the charpai where she had lain.

She yielded to him, her body limp and contorted into a silent despair, her eyes agaze at the wild sensual heat in his face, her heart turned inwards at the cold virginity that seemed to freeze her at the contact with him. He made a sudden upcharge, as if he were dealing a deathblow to himself and to her and he swung her body hard, hard, harder, tearing the flesh of her breasts, biting her cheeks and striking her buttocks till she was red and purple like a mangled corpse, ossified into a complete obedience by the volcanic eruption of his lust.

The gracious curve of her fair Himalayan face was the shame of roses as it lay encased in the tangles of her hair at the angle at which she had first known love after her marriage. Only the pain of Reggie-Hunt's mutilations derided the bliss.

15

'Two leaves and a bud
Two leaves on a bud,'

sang Leila, without hearing herself, as she plucked the flaxy flower at the far end of a field among scattered crowds of men, women and children.

'Two leaves and a bud
Two leaves on a bud,'

She sang and she picked the flowers, with an almost religious scrupulosity.

For Neogi's figure hovered in the distance and there was a majesty in the sweep of his arm that weighed upon her like a death-in-life. The flushes that stood among the deep green shrubs like the flowers of a gooseberry-bush yielded their soft stems and delicate leafy branches quickly to her hands. Sometimes her eyes noticed the strong veins that serrated the leaves and her mind kissed the bloom of its tenderness almost as she caressed the sweetness of her own face in the mirror. But the monotony and the irksomeness of the job had drowned in habit the memory of that elysian picture which the first sight of women plucking had imprinted on her. The sun overhead scorched her body like a fire. And she sweated profusely as she bent over the stalks with the basket on her back.

'Look sharp, look sharp!' Neogi shouted, rushing past her. 'And woe betide him or her who has not a goodly weight accounted for. I shall give a taste of my stick to anyone I see lazing about, and I shall get the Sahib to impose the fine of half the pay.'

'Some there are who are favoured by the sahibs,' muttered Narain's wife as she plucked the leaf in an orchard nearby.

'Yes, some there be who give their wives away to the sahibs for money and then preen themselves on their power before us,' said Chambeli brazenly, aloud so that Neogi and everyone might hear her.

'Mother! Mother! baby is crying,' called Baloo, Narain's elder son from a pathway by the road.

'Acha, acha, acha, don't eat my head,' cried Narain's wife, and she rushed away towards her son, more because her husband had ordered her not to talk to Chambeli, saying she was a bad woman, than because she wanted to attend to her baby before she had gathered enough leaf.

For she had not the time to look after the children and often wished she had known some way of preventing them from coming to the world. Some of them, of course, had died a natural death. But now, though she hoped her husband would not come to her one of these nights and give her another, she was somewhat concerned about her progeny, because they would soon learn plucking and be a useful help to the family. Baloo, who was only five, sometimes did ten to twelve cuts a day. And they were really no trouble because they did not have to be left at home. No sooner were they born than they could come with their mothers to the bushes and sleep

on the wayside.

A whole gang of suckling humanity lay there under the torrid sun upon the Mother Earth. She herself had spread a ragged piece of blanket for her son on the pathway, but the baby's body was growing strong, for it had rolled into the dust. She rushed towards it and caught it up.

The other day she had come back after plucking and found it lying face downwards in a drain, and the child of a coolie woman from Mahabaleshwar had been discovered lying dead at the foot of a precipice on the south side of the garden.

She kissed her baby, and thought she must make a hammock of a cumbly and see if she could suspend it to the branch of a shady tree. The little brown thing in her lap uttered a fierce cry of hunger and warned her of the necessity of comfort. She pulled out the teat of her left breast from a tight-fitting bodice and gave suck to it.

'I will report you sick and get you marked half a name (half pay),' bullied Neogi, noticing that she had sat down.

'Acha, acha,' mumbled Narain's wife, on hearing the Sardar's brusque voice, and she came back to her work with a smile of nervous acquiescence on her face that betokened a mixture of resignation and resentment and the gloom of a surly heart that had revolved to the sun and moon of habit even since the fires of love and hate had been burnt out of her and left her a heap of cinders and ashes.

'That wicked son of a pimp is on the warpath to-day,' said Chambeli, mingling the sparks of her anger against the Sahib, her jealousy of Neogi's wife.

and her contempt for the Sardar with a false self-righteousness and a falser sympathy for the miserable woman near her. 'But does the illegal son of a shameless mother think that I don't know how much money and land he got by selling his wife? And she, the sluttish whore to a thousand lovers, stands there quiet as a thief, that bitch who has become loaded with jewellery overnight when she hadn't a ring on her fingers for years....'

'Look to your plucking, look to your plucking,' shouted Neogi from a distance.

Neogi's wife stood with her eyes riveted to the ground, plucking an odd flower here, an odd flower there, listless and light as a feather, the waves of a noiseless tumult in her soul, tossing her thoughts from the shores of glory and ecstasy to the banks of a deep, inland estuary where the green gloom of a mysterious tunnel swallowed up her sighs.

'Why doesn't she speak,' continued Chambeli, 'the wife of a hundred dogs, the bitch, whose husband is even like the swine who eat dung on the rubbish heaps of the line! Why doesn't she speak, the daughter of a shameless mother and an illegally begotten father!'

Neogi's wife wiped the beads of perspiration that stood upon her nose, and she passed her hand over her lips and her cheeks, as if to smooth the scars of those lustful bites which had stamped her guilty while she was innocent.

'Oh, she is casting her anger across at me,' whispered Chambeli, hoarsely, mistaking the movement of her rival's hand for the gesture of vengeance that children make by describing a circle on their faces.

‘The slut, the harlot!’ And she fell upon Neogi’s wife like a vulture with her claws outstretched, tearing the woman’s hair, biting her shoulders, scratching her face.

Neogi’s wife retaliated with a subtle violence that arose from the sultry fire of a remorse at her misdeeds and from the viscerated pain of her tortured soul. But she could not get a grip on her adversary.

And suddenly, a riot of noises spread throughout the valley. The men nearby shouted abuse, the women screamed, the children howled.

Neogi came, brandishing his stick and struck Chambeli’s side with it as if he were hacking a tree at the roots. But the terrible demon of jealousy that possessed that woman made her oblivious of the cracking of the bamboo on her bones, and she charged her enemy with an evil ecstasy that seemed to gather up all the aching lust, all the defeats and despairs that had slept for days in her dark, full body.

Leila looked helpless and shivering towards the edge of the forest where her father was supposed to be. But she could not see anything beyond the white haze that spread over the fields except the dense line of the forest trees.

Narain’s wife came to her and giving her her baby, went to call Baloo.

‘Look for our Buddhu, too, won’t you?’ Leila shouted after her. ‘Hai, hai. I hope he is not in that crowd.’

For before her a throng of people had gathered and Neogi, unable to separate his wife from Chambeli, had begun to push the eager, gesticulating, shouting, abusing, harassed crowd. The impact of

his split bamboo on their bones made a sharp, reverberating noise, and Leila trembled to think that her brother might be among the throng.

'Sons of pigs, dogs, you defy my authority,' Neogi howled, as he swung his stick and struck whoever and whatever came into his range. His thick-set body rushed to and fro like a wild bull or rhinoceros, and as he worked himself up into a self-willed orgy of excitement he towered over the weeping, moaning, shrieking bodies of men, women, children and tea-bushes, like a veritable Yama, the two-horned, imperishable God of Death.

Leila had been running with Narain's crying baby in her lap, but she found her legs paralysed by the sound of a sudden shot in the air. She looked back, stumbled and fell. But she had enough presence of mind to rub the baby's head and see that the skull had not broken.

And then, through the mossy green of the tea-bushes and creepers, past the shafts of sunlight that dappled the feathery flowers, she heard the sudden swish of a horse galloping ten yards away from her, leaving a cloud of shifting dust on the road. She craned her neck and applied her ears. She could hear the Raja Sahib's incomprehensible speech fall harshly upon the still air.

She got up under cover of a plant and saw that Neogi had stopped beating the coolies, but the Sahib was blowing his whistle and riding his horse up to batches of other coolies who were rushing towards the orchard from different parts of the plantation.

She ducked her head and crawled to a ditch in which a rill of water whistled its way to the valley.

She filled her palm and applied it to the baby's mouth, and then bent down and drank herself. A rich silence clung to her, except that her heart palpitated like Buddhu's fluttering pigeon.

'Ari, here,' the whisper of Narain's wife came from a hollow in the hill.

Leila rushed towards her.

'We will creep through the bushes down hill to the valley and cross the river by the swing-bridge to the lines,' said Narain's wife.

And they started quietly.

But Buddhu kept turning back and Baloo began to cry.

A chowkidar rushed behind them and rounded them up, crying, 'Come before the Sahib, come before the Sahib, o swine. You are all to be presented to the Sahib to receive your punishment.'

They came stumbling ahead of the warder to the spot which had been the scene of the sudden riot. Amid the babble of tongues, amid the raving and shouting, the weeping and the shrieking, the groaning and sighing, amid the utter confusion of an hysterical crowd, rushing and running, prostrate and straining to rise, the Sahib sat on his horse, shouting hoarsely in broken Hindustani.

'Hosh karo! Hosh karo! Have you no sense!! Donkeys?'

The crowd was uncontrollable, gesticulating wildly. Men joined their hands in humility or raised their arms menacingly, swearing, cursing and begging.

'I will shoot you all,' Reggie roared.

At this threat, the crowd quietened. Some of the coolies stood almost paralysed. Others twitched their

faces spasmodically and shifted nervously on their feet.

'The angrez log civilize you,' cried Reggie, in a voice which trembled for all its angry bluster. 'Can't you leave your primitive quarrelsome habits! You ought to learn to behave....' He would have continued, but his words seemed hollow with fury.

'Because, Sahib, none of our wives, sisters and mothers are safe,' someone ventured from the back of the crowd.

'What did he say? Bring that man to the office, Neogi,' Reggie fumed. 'Bring him there. I will see to him.' His assurance was returning. It was easy enough to tackle one insolent coolie.

'Disperse them all,' he shouted to the warders, 'and take them back to their allotments to work. I shall shoot you all if you dare to lift a hand—or a foot.'

He stared at them hard for a moment, his dilated eyes shedding fire.

'Dare to utter a sound, and I will shoot you dead,' he snarled. Then casting a threatening glance round the frightened throng, he pulled the reins of his mare, dug his heels into its flanks and started riding away towards the office.

The coolies, stricken with fear and panic, began to mutter in agitated whispers. Some of the bolder spirits from the back of the crowd started to push forward again, and to shout. Reggie turned impetuously, and hurled himself towards them.

'Strike them,' he yelled to the warders, 'Strike them.' And with his lips tight, and his head strung into a wooden hardness, he rode his horse into the thick of the crowd, trampling on the men, women and

children who pushed and grovelled and ran in utter confusion. The frightened mob screamed and wailed as they scrambled and rushed in frantic dismay, but he rode straight at them, filled with a wild urge to destroy. Then he pulled at the reins of his horse and raised both hands. 'Strike, strike,' he called again to the warders and galloped forward.

The warders rushed upon the stricken coolies, and dealt blind and haphazard blows in all directions.

'Strike, strike them,' Reggie ground out the words in a brittle staccato, and barely restrained himself from hurtling forward once more across the screaming, falling, tottering crowd.

The warders ran hither and thither, helplessly impelled by the grinding force of the incessant orders. They charged backward and forward, thrusting left and right, aimlessly, till their blows had tired their hands.

'Don't let them gather again,' Reggie shouted. And he turned his back and cantered away.

16

THE sobbing, moaning mob of hurt and broken creatures seemed to waver helplessly before the image of Reggie's ferocity, as the outline of the assistant planter disappeared. But some of the bolder spirits, who had been trying to push their way up, fronted the warders after Reggie had gone.

But they, fearing that fresh pandemonium would bring the Sahib charging back on the scene to abuse them for slackness, started to belabour the wretched coolies once again, striking on all sides, without discrimination.

'The Sahibs will shoot you, fools,' they shouted. And determined to break up the mob, they redoubled their blows, striking with frenzied energy until, driven away by this fresh lathi charge, the bedraggled men and women drifted towards the road, while the wounded lay helpless.

'Ram, Ram,' some cried, as they scurried along, and 'Ya Allah,' some sighed, while some said 'the end of the world had come.'

For, suddenly, through the impact of the hard wood on their bones, they seemed to have realized the hopelessness of their lot, even as the bullocks when beaten too rigorously shiver and snort with a sudden realization.

But the shadows of the sardars who had beaten

them were still on their mind. And as they hurried, some rolled their eyeballs at each other furtively, with significant glances, some waved their arms with understanding gestures, and some whispered monosyllables of protest and derision.

'Brothers,' said Gangu, 'we must go to the haspatal, and tell the Dakdar Sahib about it.'

'Yes,' cried a Bhutia coolie. 'The wounded will be taken there. We must see who has been hurt.'

'I think one coolie has died,' said a coolie from Gorakhpur. 'By the oath of God, they will have to answer for it.'

'Go your way quietly,' came a Sardar's voice.

The Gorakhpuri stood and flashed his eyes back at the warder. And then he winced, as if he were surprised at his own bravery.

'Leave him alone, brother, leave him,' said Narain, pulling at his shoulder. 'We will go to the Dakdar Sahib, as Gangu says.'

'Yes,' said Gangu. 'We cannot let this pass.'

The indifference of fatalism in him, which had sprung not so much from a belief in God, but from years of suffering, seemed to give place for a moment to a homicidal fury which glistened with the spirit of retaliation.

'*Chalo, chalo!*' The cry rose on the tongues of the crowd. '*Chalo!*' It was the positive gesture they had all been waiting for, the single cry which seemed to crystallize all the pent-up suffering which was seeking release.

'Long live the Dilawar Sahib:' the Gorakhpuri shouted.

'Long live Dilawar Sahib,' the slogan rolled across

the green fields, flowed like a reverberating tide through the air and mounted the pyramid of the hill where the hospital stood.

De la Havre, who had been busy, observing a slide in the dispensary, heard the roar of this sea of sound and craned his neck out of the window. He was dazed with utter bewilderment at the sight of the swarm of coolies running like locusts across the valley. He rushed out to the veranda.

The advance guard of the coolies sighted him beyond the drive from the edge of the road, and raised the cry, 'Long live Dilawar Sahib!'

The batches behind them repeated the cry, and lifted their legs to run.

That these docile, gutless, spineless coolies, who never raised their voices except on the day of the holi, who went about the plantations with masks of crass stupidity on their faces, whose habitual submission was never disturbed by any outrage of man or beast, by hunger, pestilence or slow disease, that they should come shouting the tribute of their appreciation for him, was uncanny. He was convinced that something very terrible must have shocked them out of their humility. And he was going to run out to them. But he restrained himself, urged by a feeling that it was better for him to prepare quietly for what was coming, since the crowd seemed very excited.

'So even a worm turns,' he said, and his head reeled with the transparency of his vision. But he felt embarrassed. He stood fixed like sun, quivering with the white heat of his own passion, staring from afar at the storm of madness that came forboding ruin

on the shimmering wind, reaching out towards the heaving chests, the hard, clenched fists, and the thudding footfalls of the copper-coloured men. And he felt he had not the strength to meet them. A warm glow of power surged up to his face. But he still felt self-conscious. He lifted his narrow shoulders, staring rigidly, and stood empty and tense. Some of the coolies were creeping up with joined hands, and prostrating themselves before him.

‘What has happened?’ he asked sternly, yet incapable of suppressing a faint smile.

‘Huzoor, Huzzor . . .’ they breathed in the awful stillness, like worms swollen with the arched heat of defiance in the braziers of their hearts.

‘What is the matter?’ he repeated, embarrassed and agitated by the awkwardness of their abject silence. There was no answer. Only the men grovelled, intent, before him, sodden with the sweat.

‘What has happened, Gangu?’ de la Havre said more softly, sighting the accursed man with whom he had already come into contact. ‘Get up and tell me what has happened.’

‘Huzoor,’ said Gangu slowly, stretching his joined hands. He struggled to answer, but his lower lip trembled with the silence and tenderness of grief. And he could not speak.

‘Huzoor,’ said Narain, taking up the cue with more alacrity. ‘The coolie woman, Chambeli, who used to live at the bungalow of Raja Sahib, quarrelled with the wife of Neogi Sardar, who lives there now. And when we went to separate the two *budmash* women, Neogi Sardar beat us all. The coolie log from other parts of the plantation came, and the other sardars

began to wield their clubs. And then the Laftan Sahib came and rode his horse on some coolies. You can see the marks on the bodies of the men here. And one coolie has died and there are several wounded.'

De la Havre felt a dismal wave of futility, the utter invisible ache of helplessness. And yet he stood, stiff and unbending. But then he heard a murmur of confused babble go through the crowd at his feet. And, fretful and impatient at his own inconsequence, he burst out :

'Go to the Burra Sahib and report to him.'

Then, as if he were talking to himself, he continued, 'Of course, it is no use. You want a coolie raj, you people. Why do you let them beat you? Why can't you beat back—all of you together?

'What can we do, Huzoor?' said the Bhutia coolie. 'You are our *mai-bap*, Huzoor.'

'I am not your *mai-bap*,' shouted de la Havre, angrily. 'I am like you, a slave of the planters. I do not suffer from them as you do, because they think I am a sahib. They and their like beat the workers of Vilayat in the same way as they beat you.' He was embarrassed to be talking thus, shocked at mouth-ing his intense convictions here to these men. He felt apart. And yet he forced himself to go out to them.

'Even though they be sahibs, Huzoor?' said the Gorakhpuri coolie.

'Yes,' said de la Havre. And then, after a moment, he added, 'There is no difference.'

'Huzoor,' said Narain, abjectly. 'Huzoor, you are *mai-bap*. Talk a few words to the Manager Sahib

about the Sardars and save us from the anger of Raja Sahib.'

'Come with me' and we will go and see the Burra Sahib,' said de la Havre. But he heard a stirring behind the bushes, and saw some coolies come panting for breath under the weight of the groaning men they bore on their shoulders.

A hushed whisper of dread passed through the straggling crowd, gathered in the compound of the hospital. Then there was a sharp iteration of frenzied chatter.

De la Havre had to decide suddenly whether to go with the living to complain to the Burra Sahib or attend to the dying. He stood still and felt the torment of the whole valley become real before him, like a solid wall against which he was knocking his head. The torment of this valley, of this land and all the other lands become an invisible mass of hard impenetrability.

'You take courage, Gangu. You take courage, all of you,' he said. 'Get together, and go and tell the Burra Sahib the whole story. And tell him you won't work till he gives you justice. And tell him I sent you. I will talk to him myself later.'

The coolies rose and bent their heads on their joined hands.

'Go, then,' he said.

'Dilawar Sahib, ki jai!' the Gorakhpuri coolie shouted, impetuously.

'Dilawar Sahib, ki jai!' the rear ranks of the crowd burst out.

'Come, brothers,' urged Gangu softly.

'Come, brothers,' shouted the Gorakhpuri. 'Come!'

De la Havre stood for a moment to ask himself what he could do, what he really felt. But he could find no answer. He was only aware that he must go to the surgery. He tried to force himself to feel something, some pity, some remorse, or tenderness. But all his blood seemed to have dried up. And he stared before him, still, detached, apart. Even in his brain he could not see the crowd except as a solid mass.

But as he walked towards the waiting-room, he could see three bleary, sweating coolies huddled against one another.

A tremor of weakness travelled down his spine.

17

THE coolies crawled away towards the manager's office. The bright sun shone upon them and blackened their swarming forms, till they looked like an army of ants proceeding along the dusty road among the acres of parcelled green. The vast span of the valley lay before them and the mountains and the forests cast their shadow from behind. They looked from side to side with drooping, furtive eyes, and quavered inwardly with fear, even as they looked at each other to give assurance and to crave comfort.

'I am stricken with fear,' said Gangu. 'The Burra Sahib will surely beat us.'

'Don't be afraid, brother,' said the Gorakhpuri coolie.

But Gangu felt in his bones a craven panic that he was growing too mad to master. He scanned the green heights that rose above the darker puffs of green in the spotted woods, as if he were seeking for some haven of rest for his soul, among the far distant spaces of the earth, against the doom with which his world seemed cursed. And at the same time he knew that the remotest and stillest place he sought was really in his breast, where now raged sorrow and fear and all the turbulent chords of his smouldering protest. He went along, however, torn thus between himself and the better part of valour,

till he was blind to his impulses and only conscious of the sweat that bathed him in its clammy grease.

'Yes, don't be afraid, brother,' said Narain, tugging at his nose with two fingers and casting a great deal of sweat and dirt away.

Gangu moved in the languor of a silence from which all the anger, the weariness and pain had been banished, as if life and death were one, and no hope in the universe apart from a relentless doom.

'I shall tell the Burra Sahib all that Dilawar Sahib told us,' said the Bhutia coolie, with a glow of power that surged uneasily in his frame. And he bent his stooping shoulders when he should have straightened them, and walked straight when he should have bent them, shuffling along awkwardly.

But Gangu grew lonelier and lonelier as he saw the crowd jumping over impediments and rushing eagerly forward. And he felt his silence rise before him like a rock, echoing and re-echoing his pain with every flagrant word, every blatant gesture of the men.

'Come, brothers, run,' the Bhutia coolie shouted, and they were about to stampede when a clear sharp call fell upon them.

'Stop, stop! Rossdics! fools!'

As the coolies raised their faces, they saw emerging from behind the tea-bushes, the scarlet mouth of the Burra Sahib, opened large and wide like the jaws of hell.

'Where are you going?' they heard, in a vociferous bellow.

And now the forms of the Burra Sahib, of the Raja Sahib and of five riflemen came to view.

They fell back almost automatically, and stood paralysed, their hearts contracting, their shrivelled hands joined, their heads dizzy with the sudden shock of having been caught unawares.

'Hands up! Hands up!' roared Reggie, pointing his revolver at the ringleaders.

The sweating faces moved in a dumb effort to avoid staring at the Sahib, and blinked as if they were face to face with the blinding light of the mid-day sun.

'Half a minute, Reggie,' whispered Croft-Cooke, with tight-set lips, as he advanced towards the crowd with a slow deliberation, not without a grim fear of the danger he was running.

The coolies staggered, slipped at each other's heels and hurtled back at this oncoming shadow of death.

'Don't fear, brethren,' said the Bhutia coolie, trying to push his way through the hindering tiers of the crowd. And as he came up, he exclaimed, 'Huzoor. Dilawar Sahib has sent us to put our grievances before you. Neogi Sardar . . .'

'Shirrup, complaining fool,' Reggie Hunt shouted, rushing forward. 'Step back, or I will shoot you dead! Let de la Havre mind his own business. Back you go, swine, back you go to the lines!'

And he advanced a few steps towards the Bhutia, but stopped before he got too near the man and, turning, said: 'Warders, march these men back to their houses. Take them off before I shoot them all!'

The warders came forward and began to drive the men back with the barrel ends of their rifles.

The coolies were startled at the impact of the guns. Some shrieked and some cried, '*Mai bap, mai bap.*'

Oh, spare us. . . .'

'Get back! Swine,' roared Croft-Cooke, roused out of his deliberateness by Reggie's impetuosity, and advancing under cover of the warders. 'Get back to your lines. And I can deal with de la Havre Sahib.'

And he measured his steps, stiff-necked, stubborn and inscrutable, a diamond glint in his eyes.

'Huzoor!' the Gorakhpuri coolie protested.

'Off with you! off with you!' Croft-Cooke cried, advancing further.

'Hit them if they won't go back in an orderly way,' he shouted to the warders. 'Get them off the place.'

'Khabardar! Chalo! Jao!' the warders shouted dutifully, and they dug the ends of their rifles into them still more menacingly.

Some of the crowd had already turned and run. The rest fell back, stumbling, shrieking, hysterical, craven and defeated.

The vast opulence of the blinding heat and the terrific glare of the sun mixed the dust and the grime of the road with the sweat of their bodies. . . .

18

THROUGH the gathering shades of darkness, the phantom-bodied silence of fear shimmered before Gangu's eyes. The frogs croaked in the swamps as if they were protesting in a chorus against the reptiles let loose by Yama, and the beetles whined continuously as they drank the blood dripping from men's tortured veins.

Gangu was reclused in self-communion as he lay on the floor, while his children slept the sleep of innocence.

The ruthless beatings of the day burnt his heart, and he saw the figures of the Burra Sahib and the Chota Sahib and the crowd engaged in the bloody fracas in the valley. And he felt the bitterness, the folly and the pain of it all.

He had lain like that during the whole afternoon and the evening, sighing and smouldering in the heat of the hut. At twilight he had emerged from the hovel on the pretext of chopping wood fuel and fetching water. But he had found that the warders marched about and shouted that no one was to go out after dark on pain of being shot.

He had returned and waited patiently in the dark. But the tense silence had got on his nerves. From time to time, he had applied his ear to the walls of his hut and heard a confused sound of murmuring

reverberate through the air. And occasionally the sound of a hoarse cough, unmistakably Narain's, vibrated huskily through the elements. But then there was the thud thud of a heavy footfall. And he listened to his own heart beating like a sledge hammer as he sighed in despair.

'What has happened?' he asked himself through the tangled reveries in his head. 'What happened?'

But the voice within him confused the gestures of his long memory with the babble of voices that had vowed defiance to the sahibs, and stopped breathless before the righteous anger that he lacked courage to express. The threnody of his fearful, palpitating heart, however, drowned the raging clamour in his soul, and he fell into the depths below depths of a bottomless woe, the feeble accents of a hopeful prayer on his lips.

At last, after the protracted stretch of separate thoughts that drifted silently on his soul, he got up and determined to go out to Narain's hut, as if he had been beckoned by a call. He wanted contact. He wanted to be involved in a relationship with someone, as if he did not exist, had no being without such a connexion.

The sky outside seemed a dark gulf between two worlds where the spirit of fire quivered but spoke not.

He rushed in the breathless gloom and only stooped to apply his eye to the gleam of light in Narain's hut which stole through the chinks of the door. Then he paused to take breath and called:

'Narain brother!'

Narain coughed loudly and irregularly, and arti-

ficial cough that smothered the vague whispers of the talk that was going on, and said: 'Who is it?'

'It is I, Gangu, brother.'

'Come, brother, come in,' Narain said, suddenly opening the door and hustling him in.

Just then a dog barked somewhere in the lines, and Gangu's heart stood riveted in a wild stare. Narain's wife was asleep with the children in a corner, and three other coolies, the Bhutia, the Gorakhpuri, and another youngster were seated round a hookah in the glow of an earthen saucer-lamp. The smell of smoke and tobacco filled the air.

'Come, brother, come'. Narain dragged Gangu forward and passed the hookah to him. He had been talking, apparently, as he again began:

'So, you see, twenty coolies complained to the Deputy Commissioner Sahib Bahadur of Jorhat that they had been recruited from Nasik, near Bombay, under a contract for one year, that they had served for more than a year, and that, since they were paid a very low wage, they could not save anything, or have enough money to last them for food for one week, and that they wanted to leave the gardens, and could they be sent back to their homes at the cost of the planter, according to the terms of the contract explained to them before they were recruited. The Deputy Commissioner Sahib went to the Manager Sahib, and they did some git-mit, git-mit, and the coolies, instead of being allowed to go back to their homes, were ordered to go back to the garden to serve another year. They refused to do that and started to walk home. They have never been heard of since. So, brothers, we cannot do anything

but face the sahibs here....'

As the story broke on the night of Gangu's consciousness with the shock of a revelation, his eyes opened like two luminous stars in the darkness, and explored the face of Narain.

'Aye, aye,' said the Garakhpuri coolie, disturbing Gangu's concentrated glance, 'if we could only get together and go to some other plantation.'

'That would be mere madness,' said Narain. 'You don't know the ways of white folk, brother. A coolie of your age, a boy named Sridhar Tilang, was sent to prison, because he wanted to go to the Cinnamare Tea Gardens in search of work, as he had heard that there were many other coolies from his district in that garden. He was arrested and taken before the manager and questioned. He replied that he had come to the garden for work. The manager was not satisfied and thought the boy was one of those Congress wallahs, you know, brother, whom the Sarkar does not like. He proceeded to write a complaint against the coolie which the Babu, the peons and the warders witnessed. Then the coolie was handed over to the police. The complaint was that the manager suspected the coolie of belonging to the Trade Union Congress, a coolie *sabha* which we don't know of here....'

'The sahibs of the plantations won't allow its representatives to come and tell us what a trade union is, but two years ago, one of the sahibs of the Trade Union came here disguised as a fakir and told us that it existed to help the coolies to get all their rights from the employers. Tilang, brother—well, Tilang said that he had never heard the name of the

Trade Union Congress. He was sent to prison for causing annoyance to the manager.'

'Did he not complain?' said the Bhutia.

'Who would hear his voice?' said Narain. 'The sahibs can do anything, brother. When they want you, they can force you to remain, when they don't want you, they can compel you to leave. After the War, there was bad business in the trade. Some of the small plantations having earned lots of money, closed down, but the larger estates told the coolie log that they would only receive a maintenance allowance. The low wages were so low that the amounted to no more than three pice a day. So thousands of coolies left the plantations. They were lying down on the roadside in scores. But they were determined not to return to the gardens. They had seen enough of life at three pice a day. They had seen their brethren flogged and had borne the cruelties which we are suffering in silence now. And they had suffered untold privation. They would not return. They were determined—' Narain coughed, with a choking breath that was not quick enough to keep pace with the intense drama he spoke about.

'If only I could feel like him,' Gangu thought, throbbing in response to the movement at the pitch sustained by Narain's vibration. And as if to smother the awkwardness produced by his neighbour's cough, he urged him on with a genuine warmth, by asking: 'What happened then?'

'When the exodus had become general,' Narain continued, thrilling to his story, the sahibs were alarmed, brother. Therefore, they tried to stop the movement. The Sahib of the Rail garies at Karim-

ganj gave orders not to sell tickets to the coolies. Thereupon the coolies said that they would walk. And they began to march down. But about six hundred of the coolies were detained at Kalaura. A thousand others who had entrained at Goalundo because the Gandhi wallahs forced the Railway Sahibs to sell them tickets, were arrested on their way at Faridpur by the Magistrate Sahib of that town, brought down from the train, kept under watch by the police and dispersed in the morning. The Congress wallahs fed them at a place three miles off and arranged to entrain them at Koksa. But the sahibs there drove them to Belgachi, where they were fed by the townsfolk. At Belgachi, brother, the Magistrate Sahib arrived and would not allow them to entrain, even though the gentlefolk of that town offered to purchase tickets for them. The next morning the Sahib relented and allowed them to go to Kusthea. Many of them died of cholera on the way. At Karimganj, the Sarkar and the employers offered to increase their wages to six annas a day. But the coolies refused to return. Thousands of them poured into the town in the heat. They were weary and bereft, and fell by the roadside. Others wanted to get back to their homes. Some of them came from Nasik, some from as far as Rajputana, Bombay and Madras. The agent of the planter sahibs went to the river that night and disconnected the gangway, preventing many coolies from leaving by ships. During the rush, some of the coolies fell clamouring into the river and were drowned. . . Life is not life but hell . . .

Narain paused for breath, sighed and then began again. 'The Sarkar asked them to return to the

gardens. But they would not. They wanted to go back to their homes. They would go on foot, they said, even old men and women with infants in their arms, so tired were they of the *zoolm* of the employers. A Padre Sahib, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, came to their help, but he could not do anything except walk from them to the Sarkar and from the Sarkar to them, with a kind face and a heavy heart. About three thousand men, women and children were lying in the waiting-room at the station yard at Chandpur waiting to be allowed to entrain. But one train left without them, and another train left without them. The coolies gave up hope and made up their minds to sleep for the night. They closed their eyes and soon they were asleep. A company of Gurkhas charged the sleeping crowd with bayonets, and the butt end of their rifles. There were little children and new born babes among them, brother, and they wailed and they howled. One sick woman with child got entangled in the iron bars of the gangway outside the ticket-house: the Gurkhas gutted her! Many coolies lay bleeding and dead when the townspeople heard the uproar and arrived with lanterns in their hands. What happened to us to-day is as nothing unto that. So, brothers, there is nothing to be done except to make up our minds to settle down here and smoke the hookah, and mention the name of Ram.'

'I am going,' said the Gorakhpuri coolie. 'I shall escape. I shall walk by night and hide by day.'

'You are a fool,' burst forth Narain. 'How can you go away from hundreds of us? If we want to do anything, we should do it here. Besides, there are tigers in the forest, and lions and wild elephants. You

will never get far, even if you get away from the lines. . . . You are in the kingdom of Yama. . . .'

The boy bent his head down, torn between the prospect of certain death and the thought of escape which had the glamour of a wild adventure about it. And he sat thus, filled with a queer strength, the power of an exigent, perilous moment.

Gangu had been completely carried away by Narain, and, weary of groping in the darkness, he now felt his blood meet the time and mood of disaster with the steel purpose defined by his colleague's clear speech.

'Come, we must arrange about to-morrow,' said the Gorakhpuri. . . .

But hardly were the words out of his mouth, when there was the hammering of a hand at the door.

Narain spread his arms wide like the horns of a bullock and levelled the men around him to the floor. Then he affected a cough and a heavy voice as if he had been disturbed in his sleep and called out: 'Who is that?'

'Why haven't you extinguished the light?' the voice of a warder came.

'All right, all right, *zalim*, let the children sleep,' he said, mixing the turbulent servility of a churlish coolie with a bullying effrontery that made his voice sound innocent. And he got up and extinguished the light, went to the door and saw that the warder had left.

'It is a good thing he came when we were silent,' he continued as he returned and abandoned his histrionics. 'Now we will leave our arrangements about to-morrow till to-morrow comes and go to

sleep.'

'I must go to my children,' said Gangu. And he ran through the darkness as if he were flying, flying from the ghosts of the starry night. His brain wheeled and his heart beat in a blind whirl and for a moment he was obliterated. Then he stood reproachful of himself and saw Leila clinging in her sleep to little Buddhu in a corner of the desolate room.

19

'THE damned mutiny will spread if they don't turn up by eight o'clock,' Croft-Cooke said to himself, nervy and quick-tempered after a bad night's sleep. He was walking up to the Club veranda from the improvised bedroom in the library, dressed in the uniform of the Assam Valley Light Horse, of which he was a reservist.

The Club had been turned into a sort of fortress overnight. The courageous ladies had spent an anxious night sleeping on camp-beds in the dining-room, while the men had kept guard with the warders by turns.

The situation seemed very tense to the members of the Club, although some of them were rather vague as to exactly what was happening. But they had talked of John Lawrence and Henry Canning and the Siege of Lucknow in 1857, as they sat about intimidatingly, bristling with loaded revolvers and double-barrelled shooting-guns. They had telegraphed to Sylhet for the police, to Manipur for the military, to Calcutta for the air force. And now they were anxiously waiting for the arms of the law to appear over the horizon, though they tried to be cool and collected.

'We should have been better equipped,' muttered Macara, dressed up in the major's uniform preserved

from the days when he had had a temporary commission during the war. 'No ammunitions, no proper communications; mediæval—that's what I call it, this state of affairs.'

'I've telephoned again,' said Reggie Hunt, who had been painfully ill at ease, sitting and standing, going into the drawing-room and coming out, fidgeting and restless. He was only too willing and helpful to anyone who desired his services this morning, as he was conscious that he was the cause of all the trouble. For deep inside him, he felt a certain remorse at having been hot-headed. And he tried to fall back on the tenderness of the young boy, looking to his elders for support, though he still measured his steps and stared straight ahead with the false pride he had to justify at any moment if challenged.

'God knows when they will get here,' said Ralph, impatient and uncomfortable. He had led a very mundane life as a farmer in Hampshire before coming to India, and he wanted to act up to the crisis, but was a little uncertain of the exact measure of sentiment called for by the occasion.

'You there, Tweetie?' shouted Macara peremptorily. He was conscious that the unnecessary emphasis which the reserves of his re-awakened militant energy lent to his tone sounded slightly out of place here. The feeling of mastery had expressed itself more casually in the army. But he was alarmed by the suddenness of the calamity, and instinctively expressed his irritation in the bullying frontal manner which had become so natural to him.

From behind the window of the drawing-room appeared the thick-set form of the engineer, rolling

and rumbling. He was casually smoking a cigarette.

'Where's Hitchcock?' demanded the Major.

'Sleeping, sir,' answered Tweetie, striking his heels as if to come to mock attention.

'Drunk?' growled Macara.

'I think he's had something, Major,' said Tweetie, suppressing a smile at his pose, and then deliberately extending the mockery into a tight-lipped facetiousness. 'Needed a bracer, sir, after the restless night.'

'Restless night', muttered Croft-Cooke. 'I should say, yes—playing bridge all night.'

'Not in great form yourself, are you?' said Macara to Tweetie, eyeing the engineer.

'If you think so,' said Tweetie, prolonging the irony.

'That goes for all of you. Barton, Smith and Creswell left the Club in spite of orders this morning,' said Macara. He snorted indignantly, paused and then continued in a milder vein.

'You know, we've got to keep discipline intact, haven't we?' He hesitated again. Then, with flushed face, he raised his voice.

'Do you know what it would mean if that crowd of coolies attacked us here? Massacre—and worse still, our prestige would go to hell.'

'The devil they care!' muttered Charles Croft-Cooke to himself.

'Good morning,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, emerging with a sunshade in her hand, and sublimely unconscious of the conflict of contending emotions. 'Isn't it a lovely morning. . . .'

Charles Croft-Cooke frowned, and turned his face away in disgust. And there was a grim silence for a

moment, during which the sun cast fiery particles of heat on the ground.

'It's Barbara's fault,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, as if apologizing to her husband for her daughter. 'And now she's crying! And even poor Mrs. Macara can't quieten her. . . .'

'He thinks he has got us,' said Macara, grinding his teeth as if to chew the bad taste in his mouth. 'Came running round here last night—reconnoitring, though he made a pretext of wanting to see Tweetie.'

And he abused de la Havre roundly.

'It's devilish,' he concluded. 'We've got to do something about it, Charles.'

'I shall sack him at once, and we can get the company's confirmation after.'

Macara went towards the lounge to see if Mabel had emerged. Croft-Cooke and Hunt followed behind.

'Everyone has the blues this morning,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, disconsolately as she stood all by herself on the veranda.

'As soon as an aeroplane comes across,' said Macara, 'they will give up their tactics. And the detachment from Sylhet will put the fear of God into them. . . .' Then he said in a quiet even tone, 'If only we had listened to the coolies' grievances and not started play-acting. . . .'

Then he said: 'Yes, Tweetie sat detachedly. All this army stuff is unnecessary, if you ask me.' He swallowed the smoke of his cigarette, irritated his strained nerves unbearably.

He took a copy of the *Bystander* from the table. And, looking for a George Belcher cartoon, he

tried to suppress a wave of resentment against their stupidity. De la Havre had come to him the night before, to see if the others could be persuaded to settle the matter amicably. And they had all got het up about it, sleeping with revolvers under their pillows and wiring for riflemen to supplement their warders, donning uniforms and flourishing arms. 'These amateur gunmen,' he said to himself, accepting the proverbial verdict, 'are more of a danger to themselves and their friends than to any one else.' He knew the coolies too well to think they would want to fight, and de la Havre might be an impetuous fellow, but inside him he was reasonable. Had not he said last night that he had only advised the coolies to go and put forward their complaints to Croft-Cooke and Hunt, and then the planters had started bullying them, and had lost their heads completely? Yet these people had lived among the coolies so long. Surely they knew And now they were getting on his nerves.

'Hello, Mac, old boy, you look very smart,' said Hitchcock, as he staggered into the lounge, his face red with the heat, his eyes swollen with sleeplessness and drink.

'You are insolent, Hitchcock,' said Macara, 'and beastly drunk.'

'You will be court-martialled for insulting a superior officer, with de la Havre, if you don't behave,' mocked Tweetie, looking slyly across towards Hitchcock.

'We have been considerate to your friend,' said Croft-Cooke to Tweetie. 'But he incited the mob to murder. He must be dealt with summarily. He started

the mutiny you know, not I. And all this disorder’ Croft-Cooke was really feeling most upset about the disorder and disgusted with the extravagance of the whole business. It had interfered with the normal work of the plantation. This waiting about in the Club, when he would have been at the office, attending to the morning’s mail, annoyed him more particularly because it infringed on the routine of his existence, and he was essentially a creature of habit. And he was apprehensive of the effect of the riot on the next balance sheet.

‘He’s a skunk and a deserter,’ shouted Macara. ‘Why didn’t he sleep here with all of us last night? Under normal conditions, he would have the guts shot out of him, and the whole insolent pack of his men!’

A grim silence followed, tense and electric with the forced contradiction of many wills. Hitchcock began to whistle in order to overcome his embarrassment.

Then through the netting-covered window of the lounge came the heavy buzzing sound of an aeroplane.

Macara, Hunt and Ralph rushed towards it.

‘The aeroplanes have come! The aeroplanes have come!’ shouted Mrs. Croft-Cooke, as she came forward impetuously, waving her sunshade.

Macara hurried out to the veranda. ‘Come, boys, get ready,’ he called.

‘Saved! Saved!’ said Croft-Cooke gleefully, waving his hand and looking up to sky, as, after wheeling round the plantation, the R.A.F. bomber shut off its engine and fluttered down to the polo-ground. And Croft-Cooke walked out of the drawing-room.

The ladies emerged from their toilets, powdered and scented and lovely, in spite of the general agitation. They peered out to the soggy polo-ground from the drawing-room window.

Tweetie stood in the door, contemplating virile human nature with the lid off. 'I suppose they think it is like the relief of Alcazar,' he said to himself. And he tried to sense the curve of hatred behind the cold, hard fact of the aeroplane before him. A malignant thing it seemed, being put to such use. And yet the mechanic in him could not but appraise the neat piece of engineering.

The Royal Air Force officer jumped from his seat and saluted Macara. The Major led him back to the veranda.

'Got here all right sir,' said the officer. 'Difficult landing. Couldn't find it for a time. But it'll be easier for the four bombers following. There is a platoon of the Yorkshire Light Infantry with one N. C. O. in those. And the G. O. C. has ordered two companies of the Eastern Frontier Rifles to be dispatched here.'

'Get breakfast served, Hunt,' said Macara, excited at the prospect of action. 'The bombers will be here any moment, and we want to march down on the affected area as soon as they arrive.'

THE morning mist had risen over the valley and evaporated with the dazzling burst of sunlight. The air was still under the clear even sky. The welter of leafage was tense beneath the world's hollow cup. There was a concentrated lull in the slow heart of the day, as if life missed a heart beat in the march of time.

Then a sudden buzz as of the humming of insects in the undergrowth of the forest. Then an elfin madness filled the air, and spread over the hills and vales, scattering sparks of fire on the field and a tide of echoes in its wake, as if the frenzied flies and cockroaches and grass-hoppers had exploded through the force of some shrill alchemy administered to them by the planters. Then there was a tearing sound on the rim of the sky.

The first aeroplane had shot glistening forth into the air, leaving behind a trail of smoke and an echo. The second steel bird flew over. The third. The fourth. They soared above the heads of the coolies with sharp, purring noises.

The coolies followed the course of the stream-lined splinters over the valley with curious, wondering, wide-open eyes. They lifted their heads under the shadows of their hands and stood bewitched by the cataclysmic music of the evil force. They were cer-

tain that it was the handiwork of Good Yama. They bent their heads and rolled their eyeballs at each other in wonder and fear and love.

The birds flew now with a sharp, destructive sound, ceaseless as their serried shapes gyrated.

The apprehension in the coolies' souls became perturbation.

'They be spirits risen from the earth to destroy us, even as the demons sometimes arise out of the nether worlds,' said an old coolie. 'The doots of Yama.'

'Hai, hai!' cried a woman as she saw the nose of a plane dive down for a moment and then charge upwards.

A child standing by her shrieked.

There was general consternation in the lines and the population moved helter-skelter as in a panic.

'They be flying carriages,' said Gangu, who had been in a cantonment once to visit a cousin of his, and had heard of, though had not seen, an aeroplane. 'There is a sahib in each.'

'There be sahibs in them?' said an old woman. 'No! It cannot be. They be evil spirits. I saw them rise out of the hills with my own eyes, like ghosts, a few moments ago.'

'Evil spirits, indeed!' said Narain. 'There are bombs in them which will be dropped here soon. Run into the valley and hide, if you value your lives.'

'Run into the valley!' shouted the Bhutia, 'if you value your lives.'

'Run into the valley,' reiterated the Gorakhpuri coolie, 'if you value your lives!'

'Hai, hai!' cried the women.

'Undone!' cried the man.

And, scared, they all ran.

'Let us go to the Dilawar Sahib!' shouted Gangu. But no one listened.

They all ran in different directions, each for himself, and all for themselves, except those who loved their daughters and sons. These drifted in search of their children in defiance of the hazards.

The droning steel birds swooped low over the lines, so low that they almost scraped the ceilings of the rude huts.

There were shrieks and cries and groans—an utter pandemonium.

The steel birds flew gracefully away, but left the haunting memory of a trembling dread among the population.

As Gangu ran to collect his daughter and son, he saw a man, coolie woman, blanched by mortal fear, totter to her feet and collapse. He rushed to her and put his hand to her pulse, but she was dead. From the protuberance of her belly he saw that she had been pregnant.

'Happy death,' he murmured, 'with a soul which had tired of pining in its sorrows.' And he ran towards his hut. He found the children stricken with fear, waiting at the doorstep, their eyes cast upward in abject terror and devouring curiosity.

'Come', he said to them, but he stood vacant, not knowing where to go.

Just at that moment, however, he heard Narain call out :

'Dilawar Sahib is here! Dilawar Sahib! Keep calm! And come!'

Gangu saw the apparition of the Doctor's hulk

loom across the coolie lines. He caught his children by the hands and ran. From the look on the Sahib's face, he alone seemed to have escaped being torn by the contraries of emotion.

'Come with me and you will not be touched! Come with me,' the Sahib was shouting.

'Dilawar Sahib! Dilawar Sahib! Come to the road with Dilawar Sahib,' yelled the Bhutia.

'Come! Don't run!' the Gorakhpuri called, hanging near the Sahib as if he were craven.

A number of people gathered round de la Havre.

He beckoned them and started towards the road. He walked with difficulty, trying to avoid trampling on the weeping urchins. He felt feeble and stiff and worn. But he had the consolation that he was acting for freedom, for personal liberty and private virtue—that he was acting for the lives of these people. He knew that for the moment his cause was doomed, but he believed he might be able to do something, anything.

A column of men in khaki loomed up in the road, before he and his crowd had gone a hundred yards.

A volley of shots rang overhead, and scattered his followers almost before he had collected his senses. Another volley of shots brushed the dust at his feet before he could take another step.

Pale and haggard, he stood as if struck to the heart, and a darkness passed before his eyes. Then he could see a column of Tommies headed by Macara and Croft-Cooke, marching towards him. Shrill cries, wild groans, broken hoarse shouts were behind him—the clamouring of an indistinguishable crowd of falling, running, staggering creatures. His

eyes were fixed in a visionless stare, and dread, utter dread, seemed to become incarnate in the air.

'Halt!' he heard Macara order, and then, 'Stand at ease!' And the spirit that made the Empire stood triumphant before him.

'Look out, you fool!' Macara shouted to him, advancing a few steps. 'I would have shot you dead, and all this crew behind you if you were not a white man. So come off those tactics of yours.'

'And you are sacked,' said Croft-Cooke, following Macara, and flourishing his arm in an unexpressed admonition.

De la Havre looked dumb and astonished that he had no words to answer them.

'You bless your stars you haven't been shot dead,' cried Reggie Hunt, shouldering his way up.

De la Havre flushed red for a moment and then stared at the man. Then he drooped his chin, and hung his head down.

'The mutiny has been crushed,' he mumbled with a defeated smile.

'As you were! Quick march!' Macara ordered.

The detachment of Tommies marched up the road.

21

JOHN DE LA HAVRE walked along the familiar pathway towards Croft-Cooke's bungalow. He knew that it was the last time that he would ever be going this way. And he half-expected it to change, and become different somehow, and look tragic, taking the colour of his mood. But the landscape lay passive and unconcerned, as it would doubtless continue to lie, unless there was an earthquake or some similar catastrophe, or unless it opened up to swallow the sinners on the Judgment Day. And even the agitation in his soul was not quite the splendid torment of a love-sick swain in a film or melodrama. It seemed absurd, and irrelevant, apart from the lingering strain of self-pity that recurred again and again, and that he sought to suppress, and the dim recognition of the fact that he would never see Barbara again.

The very content of his thought seemed naive and inadequate. And he set himself self-consciously to define the position exactly, the changed position. For until a week ago, in spite of occasional doubts and misgivings, in spite of occasional bouts and differences, it had all been splendid. And she had been deliciously mischievous, mimicking everybody and laughing and talking, full of brightness in her eyes and silliness in her head. And everything had seemed tender and right, even all the sentimental talk.

And the fantastic dream of a home where they could be together with a tiled bathroom seemed the easiest thing to realize. Even after he had been dismissed as a renegade, she had come to see him. . . . Was it his reproach about Smith the policeman to whose bungalow she had said she was going for a cocktail party that had made her write and sever all connexion with him? True, he had been slightly jealous. Or had he feigned jealousy because he thought jealousy would bind them together? But primarily he had resented the fact that she should want to go rushing off to a party on the one evening when he wanted her to be near him. And then had he not apologized? And had he not allowed her to go? And now she was changed.

Everyone was like that, perhaps, and everything. A word was said, something happened, some littlest thing, a breath was breathed, or the air blew, and people changed and the whole world lay like a gulf between them. And then one was alone, alone, trying to understand why it had all happened. . . .

But obviously she had only used that remark about Smith as an excuse. She had wanted to make up her mind about him, because she could not be on his side when all the others were ranged against him. She had borne enough rebukes from her mother and had withstood for months her parents' efforts to poison her mind. Yes, he understood her position; he could see clearly how, inured by habit to regard personal happiness as the *summum bonum* of life, she wanted a respectable marriage with a certain amount of income, and all the rest of the world could go to hell. She had not realized that he could not give her this

when she had fallen in love with him, because her parents' eternal nagging had accentuated her interest by the very spirit of opposition it evoked in her. But now all the content of the accumulated nagging and advice which her mother had given her had emerged from the subconscious where it had lain buried and affected by the bluff of righteous indignation of the others at his 'betrayal,' which had been built up during the night when the Club had been turned into a fortress. She had driven herself to resolve finally to cut herself off. And his remark about Smith had just come in handy as an excuse.

He saw a coolie rush past him with a bundle of firewood on his head. He pulled up uneasily and looked back through the gloom of the valley for a while. Some patches of land jutted out, pale blue; others were dense and still, and below there was the swish of the torrents, an insistent counterpoint that ended in a boom.

'Yes, intellectually he could see it all so clearly,' he said to himself as he continued his walk—but emotionally. What strange law of heat, what curious law of light, what principle of magnetism bound him to her? For really, if she had found that he was not the man for her, he had known long ago that he might soon get bored with her. And even if he had grown into her and she had grown into him, a difference of atmosphere, a sudden alteration, a movement of life, a break brought about by word or act might have changed them. Only his curiosity was eternal, the urge to know and the realization of it, only that was endurable. And yet he worried.

Thus divided and shaken by the crisis, he walked

along.

The twilight cut the gravel path before him with an eerie suddenness, and the waxed reeds in a swishing waterway trembled in the fast gathering darkness. And he felt as if he were walking into a pit which would engulf him and devour him for ever. But he stumbled on quickly, nervously now, as if a demon possessed him. The crystallized force of the thoughts he had been thinking impelled him forward, even as it had driven him into a panicky abandon of flight in the past, when he became a long-drawn symphony, walking round and round the night, torn by a dull pain which refused to become dramatic. He tried to rally his thoughts into a histrionic gesture. But he knew he was acting. Why could he not cry now, as he had cried when he was a child? And though the stirring emotion that might move him to tears refused to come, he could see himself growing up from a boy in an Eton collar and shorts.

Exaggerating a genuine feeling into a conceit, he mocked bitterly, the cruel concentration of his being on one thing, had always been a part of his nature. Why could he not rally the whole of his being now to the one-pointedness of heightened emotion? But the sentiment shimmered before his eyes, poetized and abstract, as if it were the reasoned statement of a mood in a book. It was curious, he thought, how he had to mingle inspiration with perspiration not only to recall old feelings, but to sense the present ones.

He gave up groping after great emotions and splendid sentiments, and thought of his childhood more casually.

He saw himself once again going about the streets with the open large eyes of perpetual wonder, with an insatiable curiosity, a devouring curiosity. He recalled how he used to go off into the woods near Cheltenham all on his own, collecting insects. A young Russian with straight hair who fished for insects in a net in the stream had put him on to this game. And that was what had started his early mania for zoology, just as it had been the heavy pressure on his chest, the weight which used to impel him to burst into insolent and insulting behaviour in his mother's drawing-room, that had driven him to write verses. He smiled to think of the banal and irrelevant source of ideas which when unified, looked so grand. 'So much self-deception,' he said, debunking himself for a moment. But then, with a natural kindness for himself which made self-depreciation seem harsh, he congratulated himself by discovering that it was essentially that impetuous, restless, inquisitive mind of his, seething with activity, always looking for the causes of things, for some unifying concept, that was important, because it made for a spacious view, for comprehensiveness.

Suddenly the picture of his father, drunk and dribbling on a book which lay in his lap as he sat lighting a pipe, came before de la Havre. And he recalled how afraid he was of the old man and yet how he liked to be near him, to hear him talk of the days he had spent in India in the I.C.S. Those stories had made him come here. And if only the old man knew to what cost, he would hate his son, and despise him as a renegade.

But, then, his father was blunted by his loyalty to

the machine of the bureaucracy which ground all human understanding beneath the wheels of its laws. De la Havre could now understand. For how different India was, and how it had changed him.

He remembered his early student days, when he had not liked doing medicine, and had spent his days collecting first editions and writing fantastic poems. But for his father's bullying, he would never have stuck to medicine, and would have dissipated his energies.

And if he had not come to India, he would never have awakened to the potencies of medicine. He could never forget the insistent sound of that cry, 'for the belly,' 'for the belly,' which had followed him about in the streets of Lahore, the disgusting cry, as of a dog whining, which had made him look at the child running behind his tonga and begging for the gift of a pice. Before he had always deliberately turned away from the leprous, lousy, maggot-eaten cripples and beggars, who huddled together by the roadway, and cringed with misery in the dust, making one ashamed with their abject himility.

And then the two years here and at Jhelum, without books, without apparatus, out of touch with what was almost everyday knowledge in Europe.

And then all this upset, and Barbara.

His brain was numb with the weight of his unexpressed fury. He moved briskly to shake off the exasperation. He ground his teeth and hardened his jaws to speak, to utter the truth of his inmost being. But he felt self-conscious and seemed to himself like Don Quixote, fighting imaginary windmills. His body reeled. He could have gone mad through his frustra-

tion.

The warm, dark glow of the night was deepening on the horizon, and the flaming summits of the Himalayas were dyed a rich turquoise blue. The teeming vegetation hummed incessantly with the soft, quivering heart beats of the lives it enclosed, and the swift currents of the waters in the hills rolled into a sharp sweep that seemed to gather up all the air of the valley into one fearful curve.

De la Havre probed the depths before him as the myopia of the night filled his eyes. An eerie breeze whistled among the trees, and sent a grisly thrill creeping into his bones. He started, sniffed, dilated his nostrils to breathe deep and reassure himself. But it was difficult to keep steady, he felt. He was agitated and nervy. So he just looked about aimlessly as he walked along through the meadows of a patch of grazing ground.

Then he could see two golden lamps burning through the shaggy growth of bush which hedged Croft-Cooke's bungalow.

Now that he was nearing his destination, he felt that it was all futile. He should go back. For he felt isolated from the whole world for a moment, detached and cut off. But he could not go away from Assam without seeing Barbara. He could not feign the heroism of men who could colour tragedy with a smile. If he were honest with himself, he knew that he wanted the girl. Whatever she was, however she was, he had wanted to marry her. And he had known that strange tenderness with her which he had never known with anyone else. He could have shouted to the whole world and told it without fear of being

laughed at that he wanted this girl. The vows made in the silken air of a warm embrace, when they were intoxicated, rapt in each other, went swirling along the tide on the stream of fire inside him. 'While you are you and I am I, while the world holds us both, nothing will take you away from me,' she had said, misquoting Browning. And he had just looked at her amazed and said: 'I love you too.' 'I feel the beauty of your love for me, my darling,' she had said then, 'it is a miracle that it should be me.' And he had taken courage from her *naivete* and had already prepared the answer he would give to the snobs who might say, 'But de la Havre, you are an intellectual, and she is a silly girl. There is nothing in common between you,' or to the cynics who might sneer, 'You're just moonstruck'. That answer was in the smile in her eyes and eluded definition. But he did not want to expose it before the gaze of knowledge. They would only call him sentimental. And for a moment, he could understand the puritans' inhibition of sex; for to drag out the tenderness of endearments from the context of privacy into the light of loud-mouthed recognition made one embarrassingly vulnerable.

How could Barbara have forgotten, however? How could she have crushed the tense sensitivity which had bound her to him? And yet had done so. And there was nothing for it but to swallow his bitterness and go away. He would go to Bombay and see if the offer of a job as a radiologist was still open in the Cancer Hospital. If only it did not hurt though, to think he would never see her again, if only there was not the sweet death to which one was always

tending, if only there was not this wanting to go back to the pit of a woman's loveliness. . . .

Before he had reckoned to reach the bungalow he had emerged through the thick mist of the kitchen smoke and was ascending the footsteps of the varanda. A sizzling light spread its garish paleness on the miniature palms and a host of moths and mosquitoes burnt their wings around the wire-covered globe. He felt nervous and torn, afraid that they would all laugh at him in their minds. . . .

'Salaam, Huzoor,' said Ilahi Bux, running behind him from the followers' huts. 'The Burra Sahib at the cluff. Missi Sahib and Mem Sahib here.'

'Can I see the Miss Sahib?' de la Havre asked.

'I ask the Mem Sahib, Huzoor,' said the servant, and went into the drawing-room.

De la Havre stood tense and impatient in the grip of the extended moment. There was a trace of humiliation in having to wait here, when before, he would have walked in without a warning. And the fantastic thought occurred to him that they might have warned the servant to challenge him. Then he was angry with himself for imputing such low motives to them. And he shuddered with a wave of self-disgust as if the earth on which he stood had quaked in a cataclysmic upheaval. Then Ilahi Bux returned and said:

'Come in, Huzoor.'

'Hallo, John,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, putting on a smile, and offering him the tips of her four fingers to shake. 'This is a pleasant surprise, indeed!'

'Good evening, Mrs. Croft-Cooke,' he said, assuming a casual manner to cover his embarrassment, and as if nothing had happened.

'I suppose you have come to say good-dye to Charles,' she continued. 'I was telling him only yesterday that I knew you wouldn't go away without seeing us all. Do sit down.'

De la Havre trod warily across the tiger skin on the floor, and reached for the sofa. Then he sat down in a corner, taking as little room as possible. His head was bent down and he did not know what to say in answer to her.

There was an awkward silence.

'Are you packed?' asked Mrs. Croft-Cooke. 'Is there . . . ?'

'Yes,' said de la Havre, cutting in on what he knew would be an unctuous offer of help. 'Is Barbara in? I would like to see her.'

His face flushed with the effort to ask this question. His eyelids weighed down on his eyes, so that everything seemed to swim in the space about him.

'I think she is in,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, putting a great deal of goodwill into her answer. 'I think she is in her room. Mabel is with her. You know the Macaras are staying with us. They are going home on leave soon, and they are taking Barbara with them. Oh, there is the Major. I will call Barbara.'

'Hallo,' said Macara, coming in since he could not very well turn back after Margaret had announced him.

He looked immensely handsome, with his big, round face and head, and a powerful mystic stare like that of Nero. De la Havre lifted his face and smiled a rather humble smile, in spite of the fact that he was contemptuous of the man and wanted to hold his own against him. And for a moment, he traced

the lines of Macara's hard jaw. Then he became conscious that the man might catch him staring and he lowered his eyes, furtively glancing at the familiar swords and guns and cobwebbed picture-frames that hung on the walls, and the pageant of glass-eyed stags and tigers that were fixed in their eternal stance. He felt that his weak will always broke down the steel frame of the resistance he might build up in himself whenever he was face to face with a crisis, and most of his brave vaunts ended in abjectness. He knew he had a tremendous inferiority complex. And at the moment, he could feel in himself the fear he had of Macara. It was a kind of bullying, the Major's swagger. He lifted his head to look at Macara again as if to confirm his belief. But the Major seemed to be as nervous as he himself was, as he stood there looking out to the garden, embarrassed and taciturn.

'Barbara will be here in a moment,' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, bustling in. 'Will you have a drink, John? Please give him a drink, Mac.'

'No thanks, Mrs. Croft-Cooke,' said de la Havre.

'Will you have coffee then, and a piece of cake?'

'No thanks, really,' he said, 'coffee keeps me awake at night.'

'Well then, have lemonade, we have just had some from the plains.'

'All right,' he said, 'I will have lemonade.'

Mrs. Croft-Cooke went towards the veranda to order the lemonade.

Forced to accept his hostess's courtesy, he wondered how much of it was prompted by goodwill and how much by convention; she might be really sorry for

him. But then he brushed aside the idea. It was not that she was sorry for him, but that he wished that she were sorry for him. He well knew that, in order to protect itself from awkwardness and pain, society had invented nice little rules of behaviour and modes of conversation which filled up the gap, and all the time the cancer of the unmentionables grew in the soul, eating men away. He wished he could burst out and say his mind, prick the bubble of complacency and then walk out of the suffocating hell. At least he had the courage to say the truth, the truth that he had carried about in him for ways and days, had he not? He looked about him surreptitiously. Macara was helping himself to a stiff whisky from the door. They both seemed casual and unperturbed as if nothing had ever happened to disturb the blissful equanimity of their world. No, he had not the courage. He must accept the frustration exactly as they did. But it was horrible, he thought. He shifted slightly in his seat.

The realization that he, who had always been the *enfant terrible* saying the wrong thing at the right time, and the right thing at the wrong time, that he who was frank to a fault, should be bullied by their supercilious manner into suppressing himself, hurt his adolescent pride. He sat caressing the violent agony of his soul, which was crying out in its frustration.

'Will Barbara be long, Mrs. Croft-Cooke?' he asked, unable to restrain himself.

'Oh, I will go and give her another call,' she said.

'I shouldn't bother about her, my boy,' said Macara, toying with the soda syphon. 'Much too tempera-

mental, much to independent!’

De la Havre did not know what to say. He just hung his head down, and cursed himself in his mind, for having come here. He wished he could retrace his steps from the troublous sound of those empty words. He wished he could drown himself in the turbulent sea of his regrets and forget, forget, escape from the tainted past and the unholy present into some naked future.

‘She is too young to marry,’ said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, turning from the door, in the tone of a mother of the world, equally concerned about waifs and strays as about her own children. ‘You are well rid of her, John, dear.’

He looked up to her and then looked away, wondering how she could mouth such hypocrisy, and hating her, hating her for her dullness and stupidity. And the humiliation was that she had said it so evenly, so easily, even affectionately, trampling on the beautiful thing in him. And he had come here in all his innocence and his honesty. Good God, was not there any place for natural desire in this world? How could people be so ununderstanding? He writhed in a paroxysm of rage, hating the obtuseness, the thick skin, the stubbornness of this woman. He tried to muster a convenient excuse to get up and go. He thought he would say he had some more packing to do, or that he wanted to give charge of the dispensary to Chuni Lal, and he was about to rise. But then he thought that they had not asked him to come here. And if he went away now, before seeing Barbara, they would laugh at him all the more. Inside him, the self-pity and the tenderness for

Barbara became a sentiment, and he sat wriggling like a worm, whose back had been utterly broken.

And then Croft-Cooke came in and sat down, after shaking hands with him.

And then Barbara appeared, with Mabel behind her, smiling a tired smile, crestfallen and docile, with deep shadows around her steel grey eyes, and said 'Hallo,' and fell like a shrunken leaf on the sofa.

The tension increased as, for a moment, his will and her will met like wavelengths, at a point near Barbara, and electrified the atmosphere. De la Havre went pale where he had sat flushed by the glow of confusion aroused in him by Margaret Croft-Cooke's meanderings and Macara's patronage. A dumb desire for breath burnt like a low fire on his lips, craving a gesture of kindness from Barbara to extinguish it. But she had bent her head down, and was stroking her powdered arm. He knew there was no contact between them now. She had withdrawn herself completely and sat there as if she were an utter stranger.

He too recoiled back and looked at her detachedly. It seemed to him suddenly that the springtime of her beauty had matured into a blistered summer. And knowing that all eyes were on him, he looked away and dared not follow her gaze for the meaning of her mood.

As he withdrew into himself, however, the armour of his flesh seemed to snap, as if the shadow of her former sprightliness had stabbed it with a smile. He remembered how his blood used to burn like fire at the touch of her. And he felt the old strength touch his veins. He would ask her something, anything,

just to break the ice, to make a conversation. He knew her shape, her form, her motion, the way she used to speak, the light-hearted-ness, and even though her buoyancy had evaporated for the moment, surely she would say a word. He could not bear the sadness on her face, so distant and impenetrable. Was he alone vulnerable, or were they all disturbed? The silence was getting on his nerves. . . . He would ask her to come out and have a word with him.

'Wasn't there something about our dear Queen Mary in the papers to-day, Charles?' said Mrs. Croft-Cooke, picking up the paper.

Croft-Cooke was in a difficult position. If it had not been for his daughter, this situation would never have occurred. And now he wished he had made friends with de la Havre right from the start. Between the bumptious Hunt and de la Havre, he would have preferred the Doctor any day, but now things had gone too far. He must keep a stiff upper lip. Besides, Macara and the whole plantation had been involved, and he would look a fool if he capitulated.

'It is time for you to go to bed, Mother,' said Barbara smiling woodenly as if she were mocking the vivacity of her natural manner. Then the smile broke up and a scowl covered her face.

The ridiculous anti-climax to which the strength of his resolve had now been reduced disgusted de la Havre. And he felt the cheapness of all his love, all his tenderness, in this atmosphere. He was beginning to feel ashamed that he had ever felt emotions. And he hated these people, making him feel ashamed of himself. This was the way, he said to himself, they crushed out all the beautiful impulses, and this was

how they robbed everything of dignity, this reticence of theirs, this silent bullying. And, overcome by a sudden, unbearable revulsion he got up, his face grimly set and burning with all the pent-up strength of his frustration.

Assuming as natural a manner as he could, he said: 'I will say good-bye now, as I have lots to do before the morning.'

His throat had been dry and his voice travelled unevenly, confusing him still more bitterly. And then before anyone had time to reply, he swerved towards Barbara and said:

'Come and see me off to the door, Barbara?'

Barbara gazed up at him, lit with amazement at this sudden onslaught. She could not repel the challenge as well as the appeal which was in his voice, and yet she could not help looking round for the expected disapproval. She flushed red, then lifted herself with an exaggerated feigned tiredness, and stood for a moment, almost blinded by self-consciousness.

'Good-bye, Mrs. Croft-Cooke, good-bye, Mrs. Macara,' de la Havre shouted to drown his embarrassment as he took a few steps towards the door. 'I will see you at the office to-morrow morning,' he added turning towards Croft-Cooke. 'Good-bye,' and he stumbled out.

Barbara followed him, stemmed by the pain of knowing that every step she took was being watched. When would this end? Why must he drag her through this hell to humiliate her before her people? Why did he come here, when she had written to him never to see her again? The pride of her womanhood

broke within her. She had given herself to this man, and he seemed to think he had a proprietary right in her. And he had come here to demand its fulfilment, and had sat there as if he expected her to apologize to him. And now he had sought to assert his ownership openly by asking her to come and talk to him. She hurried with the rage that her feeling of inferiority gave her, the humiliation of the woman in her, the indignity to which she felt she alone of all women was being subjected and rushed out of the drawing room.

'Barbara, Barbara, dear, you must take your shawl if you are going out in the cold,' came her mother's voice. But she did not turn back.

De la Havre was waiting for her at the foot of the veranda.

'What is it?' she said to him as she descended the steps, 'What do you want?'

'I . . . I wanted to say good-bye to you, Barbara,' de la Havre said and he stretched his right hand to encircle her waist.

'No,' she said, brushing aside his hand and turning her face away from him to the shrubs which were enshrouded in a thin mist.

'But, Barbara, my darling, won't you come away with me?' he said, gathering his strength into a final resolve to speak the truth of him.

'Your life is different,' she said. 'How can I give up all my relations, all my friends? . . .'

'But you wanted to,' he said, 'and you . . .'

'I can't live up to you,' she said. 'I can't be so intense all the time. . . .'

'You did though, all these months,' he said in des-

pair.

'There was a little in me, and I admired all the wonderful things in you...but I can't do it any more. Look, I am broken and ill now.'

She seemed distant, as if she were talking across hundreds of miles. And her whole being was remote and hard, as if she had lost all the softness, all the curves that used to stir his blood, all the subtle evasions with which she used to incline him to her when he was preoccupied with something else.

'Barbara, my darling,' he said, stretching his hand again.

'No,' she snapped, quite angry, hardening her will by twisting her face.

'All right, then,' he said. 'Good-bye.' And he turned aside as if he were about to go.

'Good-bye,' she said. But yet she lingered and he did not lift his step.

'Babs, Babs,' came again her mother's voice, 'take your shawl, dear, you will catch a cold.'

'Good-bye,' de la Havre said, and tried to clutch her as she stood near him, to kiss her.

'No, no, darling,' she cried.

De la Havre had seen the shadow of her mother's form hover at the door. He turned on his feet and walked away. Tears were streaming from his eyes across his cheeks before he was out of the garden, and the hot breath of bitterness was choking him. . . . 'Oh, God,' he cried out naively, 'I was innocent and honest. . . .' And then he felt a strange emptiness take possession of him, through which the occasional feelings and thoughts of anguish and remorse fell like the leaves of a first breeze in the autumn. . . .

22

LIFE settled down once more to its ordinary routine of dullness for Gangu. He and his family had come through the trouble unscathed. And although along with Narain, the Gorakhpuri coolie and the Bhutia, he had been charged with being one of the ringleaders of the mob, brought before the Manager Sahib and fined fifty rupees, to be deducted out of his pay, he was allowed to enjoy the liberty of being a slave. It was considered that he had been cowed down enough to have prostrated himself abjectly before the sahibs. He had agreed to pay the fine after a vain appeal and he had accepted everything else without even so much as a gesture of complaint.

To himself, however, he demurred through occasional murmurs, casual whimpering, self-pitying whispers, through holy, esoteric magical verses, and sometimes through a monologue which was a constant source of anxiety to his daughter who thought he was going mad, and to his son, who believed that he had become possessed of a ginn or a bhut. But the defeated hope that had seen the suppression of his fellow coolies after the rising and the certainty that he felt of his own doom, hallucinated his vision, so that he could see the triumphant army of the *Goras* come slowly up the hill, their bayonets peeping through the shimmering sun, their faces bathed

in the colour of blood, their steel blue eyes set into sockets that stared open and hard for ever without blinking, and their uniforms the colour of dust, giving them the air of dead men risen from their graves to avenge themselves against him for all the crimes he had committed in the past. He would close his eyes as soon as he saw this vision, and since thereby the vision persisted, he would mumber: 'Who are you who look towards me? Who are you who look towards me? Who are you. . . . What have I done? Oh, can't you spare me? My heart is weeping. My wife is dead! My wife is dead! My children are young.'

And he would get very frightened and suddenly begin to walk back as if the oncoming hordes were going to rush at him. And he would bend his head and kneel down lest the bayonet gleam of their eyes should tear him. And he would begin to count the beads of imaginary rosaries and cry out: 'Lord, God, deliver me. Save me from the wrath of my enemies. My wife is dead! My children young! And my heart is weeping!'

And sometimes he would just and brood upon his fate in silence, and feel as if time were suspended in thin air and his turbid mind was washed clean of all the taints of prejudice and become the intense sun which could encompass in its glance the whole, ceaseless universe. And in this trance, he could see and hear thoughts which he felt he had seen and heard and known all his life. And he would say to himself, 'I have always said it and I say it now again that, though the earth is bought and sold and confiscated, God never meant that to happen, for He does not like some persons to have a comfortable

living and the others to suffer from dire poverty. He has created land enough to maintain all men, and yet many die of hunger, and most live under a heavy burden of poverty all their lives, as if the earth were made for a few and not for all men!

But in the vague amplitude of his mind where an invisible world breathed prophecies to the fulfilled by time, he had no hope for himself, except that, as he sat outside his hut and looked out to the valley, he could see the shoots of rice growing in his field by the river. And as the river swished ceaselessly, flowing onward through the parcelled spaces of the coolies' allotments, Gangu had a strange sense of immortality through it.

For days he would be absorbed in its course watching its water toss itself across huge boulders and little rocks, throw itself down roaring cataracts, spread itself into the valley and bathe the body of the earth with its cool breeze, touch the ankles of women, play with the children, renew the souls of the men and succour the tender plants and the reeds that bent on its tide. And he came to regard it as a creative force that bore all the burdens of existence on its breast. But sometimes he also sensed the danger of annihilation that was latent in this natural force. On some days, he felt that it would take the poor by surprise and turning its side, sweep over the earth in a destructive fury. He himself had suffered so many ups and down in his life, however, and the dull pain of a constant anxiety had so seeped into the cells of his body that the torment of this fear did not become violent. He even looked forward to it as a kind of relief from the continual nervous agitation

of days of waiting for the storm to come.

One day, a few weeks after the suppression of the riot, the storm did come.

Gangu had spent a restless night on account of the tense heat, which had mounted up to the Assam midsummer crescendo of passion. All night the earth had laid dark and lonely and damp under a massive load of suffocating clouds. The soul of the entire caged creation had moaned, groaned, pined and sighed for breath, as it lay enshrouded in the lines in the clammy, heavy, oppressive atmosphere, as if it were in the last dire throes of strangulation.

Towards dawn, the outer flanks of the besieging clouds started to move closer and closer as if the hosts of heaven were advancing from their posts to fight the war for the end of the world.

The mist broke in the twilight, a slight breeze burst through, and the half-sleeping, half-waking world, gasping for breath, now filled its nostrils deep, deeper, and stretched itself to embrace the sense of freedom which came with the wind.

Through the unfathomable depths of the dark night, the morning emerged after all, with the hope of life. The cast of the dim pallor that had coloured the vegetation from the huts to the horizon, gave place to the sweet tremor of a lightly blossomed rose.

Then the trees, the flowers and the tea-bushes, assumed a deep, tender green. The birds began to sing a hushed note of satisfaction at the prospect of a beautiful day.

And the beautiful, evil day was not long in coming, though it came with due ceremony.

For the advance guards of Indra's hosts marched

forth from heaven, startling the men below, first with bombs of thunder and fireworks of lightning, then with the splendrous sway of the battalions of elephants, then with the full array of neighing cavalry.

And then the proud army burst upon the earth, the iron hoofs of the horses producing sparks of lightning on the roof of the world, in the Himalayas, and the lancers piercing the air in sharp points of rain. The water rushed down, solidly, ponderously into the dark pools, at the feet of the trees.

The earth wept, pouring streams and torrents which mingled with the rivers and washed away the tender shoots of the coolies' rice harvest. The woods on the upper slopes of the mountains, full of the teeming vegetation of green saplings and shaggy trees, glimmered like solid, indestructible gold under the pale sheets of lightning, the southern hills chanted aloud gurgling defiance to the thunder. In the dim light of early morning, the coolies got up, wrapped in thoughts of bliss and pain, both those whose crops were washed away and those who had no fields to tend.

Gangu watched this violent play of the God, this storm, with an almost imperturbable calm, as if in the moment of his uttermost anguish, in the very moment of his despair at the loss of his harvest, he had been purged of his fear of the inevitable, he had been relieved of a terrible wight on his chest.

Slowly the sound of the rain patering on the roof over his head softened, and slowly the terrible storm dimmed into a drizzle. And, slowly, the sorrow, the fear and the love in Gangu's heart softened into the smoke of the morning.

CHARLES CROFT-COOKE was busy arranging the details of a hunt for the entertainment of His Excellency, Sir Geoffrey Boyd, the Governor of Assam. For His Excellency had declared his intention of coming down on a general tour of inspection to the tea gardens, particularly to see the disaffected areas, 'the scene of the mutiny,' as it was called.

Charles Croft-Cooke was happy, because the visit of the Governor would give him an opportunity of enhancing his prestige in Anglo-Indian circles by offering hospitality to His Excellency, and because he believed, with His Excellency, that a state visit, with due ceremonial, was just the thing to convey the dual policy of the government to the people—the policy of firm rule as well as a paternal regard for the welfare of His Majesty's subjects.

'It was a theory of the late Lord Curzon,' His Excellency had written to Croft-Cooke, 'that the Orientals have a tremendous regard for pomp and show. And they like their kings to be Great and Marvellous, and their Queens to be truly Spectacular and Beautiful.'

His Excellency had forgotten that he was hardly five foot five, that he had become grey-haired through long service in the I.C.S., and according to his friends, looked more like an insurance agent, in spite

of his high collar and pince-nez, than like the Maharajah of Patiala or Akbar the Great Mogul, and that his wife, Her Excellency, Lady Lucy Boyd, had shrivelled up through her long stay in the heat of India and was certainly not in any way like the Queen of Sheba or Noormahal.

But His Excellency embodied in himself, to a considerable extent, the Government of India's capacity for bluff, and Her Excellency could act quite well. And the rest could be left to the awe likely to be inspired by their whiteness.

Charles Croft-Cooke agreed, thoroughly agreed, because he was almost as overawed himself as the niggers would be. And for the third time in his life, the first two having been the visit of Lord Curzon and the visit of Sir George Macpherson, the Chief Director of the Tea Company, he exerted himself to do his best for the delectation of his guests.

The first thing he had done was to call all the professional shikaris from his own and the nearby plantations, for the purpose of organizing the hunt. An ordinary shoot could be easily arranged: you just had to lift a double-barrelled gun and walk on to the outskirts of the jungle and aim at a drove of birds. But an elephant and tiger hunt was a more intricate matter, involving a long-winded process, spread over weeks, sometimes months and entailing the employment of at least a hundred men, besides some tame 'lords of the soil.'

Charles had ordered the shikaris to employ as many coolies from the plantation as were necessary, to construct the kheddah, the trenched stockade.

The trenched stockade was made, including twenty

acres of jungle into its belt, and a series of drives or observation lines were cleared, round a hill from where the leaders could follow the progress of the hunt.

The coolies put on the job worked eagerly and hard, impelled by the feeling of relief from the monotony of their usual occupation of plucking, hoeing and cutting dry tea-bushes. Gangu and Narain, who had been selected for work here, were even light-hearted and goodhumoured, as much perhaps because of their affection for each other, as Narain's sociability always created the atmosphere of jollity among them when they were together, and because they had shrugged their shoulders over the past and again accepted their servitude as part of the business of life. Men have to work for someone, and this work was a little more exciting, especially as at the end of it there would be the spectacle of the hunt to witness, and a vision of the 'Lat Sahib' himself.

Only the forest got on their nerves as they worked in it day after day, its damp odours congesting their lungs to suffocation for lack of the slightest movement of air in the simmering heat, its deep undergrowth obstructing the free movement of their hands, tearing their clothes and cutting their feet with its knife-edged roots. And with all this inconvenience was mixed the clammy heat of perspiration, and the fury of the foreman who shouted at the men to hasten the work because the date of the Lat Sahib's visit was approaching nearer.

When the kheddah and the lines were ready, the shikaris spotted a herd of elephants about five miles

away, and the coolies were converted into an army of beaters. The men surrounded the herd and moved it slowly in the direction of the kheddah. It is only after dusk that the herd is amenable to pressure, so the beaters were on duty night and day anxiously watching for the right moment to come. After a week of consistent effort, during which their women folk walked to the jungle to supply their food once a day, they succeeded in bringing the herd close to the kheddah. Then the critical moment arrived. For the kheddah was situated on the steep bank of the river, all weak places in the bank having been made good. The herd, once in the riverbed, could find no way of escape except by the sloping approach out of the stockade. Two lines of trained elephants closed the riverway, above and below. And the beaters, armed with bamboos, torches, and horns, urged the herd from behind. The English planters, lifting their guns and their revolvers, followed in the distance. The herd was thus driven into the kheddah and kept there till preparations for the roping up were complete.

The coolies' work was not yet complete however. For, though the nine-feet wide and equally deep ditch surrounding the kheddah would be difficult for members of the herd to cross, the wild elephants were likely to break away the edge or cross over the body of a mate who had slipped, unless they were kept continually suppressed and in fear by fire or shining spears. The coolies, therefore, continued their watch until the herd was driven into the small roped-in enclosure, a stockade of fifty feet in diameter, constructed of massive tree-trunks cut and

carried in from different parts of the jungle.

The tame elephants collect from all the plantations were then introduced into the stockade with their drivers on top, who tried to single out the largest animals in the herd, around whose hind legs was passed a noose by men on foot, and who were then tied by a cable to the stockade. Seven of the ten elephants captured gave little trouble. Ropes were fixed round their necks and they were ready to be taken out. But the three other heavy tuskers required the best efforts, not so much of Reggie Hunt's whip, which even Croft-Cooke now thought was an embarrassment, but of the coolies. For the courage, the sense and the skill of the men on the ground was the only thing that could have brought about the temporary arrest of the animals.

Croft-Cooke only hoped that the drive of the herd into the main kheddah did not happen before His Excellency arrived, for the herd must be moved at a psychological moment, the occurrence of which it was impossible to predict.

But His Excellency was in the lucky position of being able to change his programme of visits to the other plantations and even to cut the formality of holding a durbar where he had intended to deliver a speech to the coolies, to suit himself to this psychological moment.

On the the northern bank of the river, where it made a sharp, triangular bend, a screen of foliage had been erected to afford cover to His Excellency and Her Excellency, Mr. and Mrs. Croft-Cooke, Major and Mrs. Macara, and the other English residents of the nearby districts, so that they had a

clear view for about half a mile around them.

His Excellency and the hunting party were brought in the howdahs of tame elephants, from Croft-Cooke's bungalow where they were staying, adequately equipped with guns for their protection, and stationed behind the screen, on the evening of a calm day, which soon gave place to a lovely moon-lit night.

The hunt had already begun, and His Excellency and the party were intensely excited by the chorus of yells, horn-blasts, drum-throbs and gun-shots which the coolies were raising. Charles Croft-Cooke showed off as he tried to explain the intricacies of the hunt. Mrs. Croft-Cooke kept on saying how Lord and Lady Curzon had enjoyed the hunt when they came. His Excellency said that the scene reminded him of a Hindu wedding. Her Excellency continued to say 'lovely, lovely.' But Tweetie reserved judgment in view of the danger that the coolies were running in the stockade, especially as at that moment, there was a lumbering rush of the mounds of dusky elephants towards the bank where the coolies were stationed.

The trumpet-blasts, the raving and the shouting, the shooting and the hooting, became a continuous pandemonium, as the terrified herd splashed squarely into the stream and the flames of a most malignant fire arose from where the coolies lit the undergrowth. And the trained elephants advanced slowly against the wild herd, which struggled for a way escape.

But there was only one way before the inexorable fate engineered to meet their revolt, and that way led to captivity. As the herd passed the screen of

foliage advancing towards the kheddah entrance, not without causing a great deal of nervousness and trepidation to the sightseers, so that Her Excellency, Lady Lucy Boyd fainted and Mrs. Croft-Cooke had to look for her smelling-salts, a bugle was sounded to announce that the herd had been captured. When the herd was safely in its prison, His Excellency walked up with the more daring members of the party and dropped the gate: the capture was complete. One part of the hunt was over.

The next day, His Excellency and party went after tiger, seated in the howdahs of five tame elephants.

A piece of flat ground had been cleared at the lower slopes of the hills north of the elephant stockade by the river. The bigger ranges of the Himalayas could be seen towering in the distance, with their unbroken snows glistening in the morning sunshine. At their slopes, grading downwards, were lower hills, gaunt and blue in the distance, and green where they merged into the forest.

Overnight, a bullock had been tied up on the edge of the forest at a place likely, according to the coolies, to be visited by the tiger. The animal had been killed by a beast at dawn and dragged away to the edge of the river in a field of long grass. The tame elephants, His Excellency and party, formed a ring, and, led by the coolies, began to close in to the spot, till they were about a hundred yards from it, except for the ladies, who were again the privileged spectators.

A trained elephant marched right into the ring and tried to move the tiger, which had presumably taken

shelter in the grass and the reeds.

With a sudden roar, the tiger, sneaked out of its hiding place and charged first upon the nose of the stalking elephant, then on a coolie in the advance guard of the beaters, tearing large chunks of flesh off his face and dislocating his shoulder.

'A rabbit! A rabbit!' shouted the ladies from the distance, full of excitement.

His Excellency was encouraged by Reggie Hunt to take a running shot, which missed its aim but struck the buttocks of the stunt elephant, making it totter.

Upon this, the professional shikari on the stalking elephant, seeing his life in danger, fired and the tiger fell.

'Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah, three cheers for His Excellency the Governor,' shouted Reggie Hunt, taking off his hat.

'Excellency! That was a good shot!' Excellency!' Croft-Cooke shouted.

The coolies had rushed to where the beast had fallen and were lashing its dead body with lathis to extinguish any sparks of life that might have been left in it.

His Excellency and party dismounted from the howdahs and walked up towards the spot where the tiger lay dead.

Reggie Hunt scattered the coolies out of the way with the usual epithets, only pronounced in a more brisk and efficient manner.

His Excellency put his foot down on the spotted body of the tiger as was his wont on such occasions. His Excellency's private secretary photographed him

with the group of planters behind, in that position. Another trophy had been added to numerous others which had piled up during the last twenty years.

The coolies stood away, overawed and dumb with admiration. The man, who had been mauled, groaned, shrieked with pain and called 'Hai Ma! Hai.'...

24

ALL the coolies, who had been engaged to organize the hunt, were given a rupee each as *bakhshish*, apart from the four annas a day which Croft-Cooke had generously sanctioned to be paid them while they were 'on leave' from the plantation. Also, all those men who had been marked down as *budmashes* during the mutiny were pardoned and half their fines remitted. This was the last royal gesture which Sir Geoffrey Boyd had made before his departure, to stimulate goodwill between the sahibs and the coolies.

Gangu was not too grateful for these gracious gifts, because he still had part of the fine to pay off and the debts he had incurred for his wife's funeral, on the seed he had bought to sow in his patch of ground of which he would never reap the harvest as it had been washed away, on foodstuffs which he had purchased on credit, and, of course, for the interest on the whole debt at a pice on the rupee which had piled up in the hieroglyphs of the Sahukar's books and on Gangu's heart if not in his head.

But though he was not grateful, nor content, he had begun to accept, for when you are in trouble, when a grey, dull misery has become the very atmosphere in which you live day and night, night and day, you not only bring yourself to bear the

most terrible humiliations, but you are also indifferent to any minor piece of good luck. You are neutral, dead, resigned to the passage of time, till the clock of your heart stops ticking and you have ceased to exist. And, as he accepted everything, he felt he wanted no gold, no silver, but only food, and to exit.

For however much the other senses may be numbed by the rigours of a cruel fate, the sense of taste, of hunger, the urge of the belly is perennially insistent. The mouth waters in spite of all the polite laws of society. Nature asserts itself.

And, as in the old days in his village, so, now, he plodded on like an ox all day, knowing all in his crude bovine way, grasping the distinction between himself and his masters, conscious even of the old days when he was young and had kicked against the pricks and the prodding of the rod, of the hate, the fear and the sorrow he had known, but detached and forgetful in the Nirvanic bliss of emptiness where the good and evil of fortune seemed the equally just retributions of an inevitable, inexorable fate, imposed by the Omnipotent, Omniscient Providence, of whom Siva and Vishnu and Krishna were the supreme incarnations.

Occasionally, however, he was disturbed by a sudden jolt, a kick or a lash from the sardars on the plantation, who were feeling very puffed up and proud since their triumph against the rebellion and since the visit of the Governor, and went about bullying the men more than ever before.

Gangu could understand their attitude. They had been paid a bakhshish of five ruppees each, and naturally they felt superior. For Gangu knew that as

soon as you possess anything, the world takes on a rosier hue: everything seems to go straight, and you rise in your own estimation as well as in the eyes of others, for you then belong to the few who have to guard something against the attack of the many. You are on the side of the angels against the devils, the miserable devils, whose noses run constantly, whose mouths slobber, whose bodies are broken and whose clothes are in rags. And you are embarrassed by the sight of them and turn your eyes away or walk hurriedly by, recognizing in your heart the claim they have upon you and yet refusing to fulfil it.

Gangu had himself been comparatively well off in his younger days with his five acres of land, and he realized how much longer it had taken fate to break his pride even after his fortune had dwindled into insignificance. And, as he understood, he forgave.

But, sometimes, the jolts he received were too sudden, and they dislocated him from the neutral existence to which he had become inured. For the money-lender came one day to his door, with an attachment order on the half of his pay which was left after paying the other half to defray the fine.

'I can't get any of my money back from you, Holar,' the Sahukar said in the manner which, having become stale with repetition, he tried to improve by putting undue emphasis on his words or by subduing them to a whisper. 'I have five thousand rupees locked up in your debts, and I don't know that I shall ever see the capital, let alone the interest. And I have no use for the rubbishy silver jewellery that you gave me for the mortgages. These are bad times. And there is a talk of new legislation about debts.

What can I do, what can I do to get my money back?

He was being courteous and kind, because, though he toadied to the sahibs and sent them baskets of fruit, he was not allowed to come into the lines. And, also, he was afraid that one of the coolies might turn desperate and murder him. But as Gangu opposed an abject humility and respect to the Seth's courtesy, the Seth began to shout and bully:

'I can't help it if your wife has died, and you have been fined. I want my money, do you hear, dense hillman! And if you don't return it, I will get the Sahib to cut it at the office.'

Gangu knew the reason why the Seth had not already arranged to have the salary cut at the office, because he would then have had to pay Babu Shashi Bhushan a commission every month, whereas, presumably, he had given him a sack of rice now, obtained the attachment order and done with the Babu so far at least as this debt was concerned.

'Acha, Sethji,' Gangu agreed when he realized that not all his appeals and entreaties would soften the Sahukar's heart. And he tried to console himself by thinking that at least Leila could still earn a wage and Buddhu would be earning too, and that he was old and had worked for them and would not mind being kept by them now.

But for days he was upset. 'Money is everything,' he kept on saying, 'Money is everything,' as if the phrase were loaded with all the suffering he had endured.

'Money is everything,' he said to Narain apropos of nothing, as they sat smoking under the tree out-

side their hut of an afternoon. 'Money is everything in this world.' And he did not seem to know what to say further. And he repeated the phrase as if he were blindly groping for light in a dark world, struggling to emerge from the fear in which he lay imprisoned to his habitual carelessness.

'Money is everything,' said Narain mockingly. 'Yes, brother, money is everything. It is the crux of the world—Gold. Gold is the living soul of man, the colour of rajahs and gazelle-eyed courtesans, beautiful to the sight. Gold has the glitter which no sword has, brother, for it is gold that conquers understanding, and understanding that achieves gold, so that in this wonderful world gold and understanding are but conditions of each other. Every absurdity appears agreeable in a man on whom gold has smiled, even though he look like a dog and think like a donkey. Yes, brother, money is everything. It is the root of happiness. Let us be careful never to be endeared to anything else, except perhaps our children, for it would be difficult to keep afloat in the ocean of gold, unless we rescue from its beautiful but bitter waters a little fragment of love.' And then he laughed at his own mockery.

Gangu looked up to the heavens with a heart suddenly purged of all content. And he looked around the valley where the memory of his plough-share grieved among the drifting winds like the leaves of a tree. The river flowed down, amber-coloured, and quivering almost with the same feeling with which he faced it.

For a moment his mind was obliterated. But then, in the rusty emptiness of his soul, the slow wheels of

a loaded wagon seemed to turn, crossing the bridge hesitantly and squeaking for lack of oil on the axle, groaning with a long-drawn-out agony, weeping with the pulsation of thwarted passion, sighing with the utterance of a nintolerable sob. He had so uncanny a sense of his alliance with this wagon that he turned, as if he really were the wheel, struggling to go the full circle. But as he became conscious of Narain beside him, he fell back to his original position as if he had awakened. And he wandered in all the shame of his hopeless life, shrunken by fear, broken and numbed by the hard implements of pain, surging with desire in the subterranean spaces of his being, crowned by a faint elation, tense and tearless. Then he looked again to the heavens: the pallid cup of the sky loomed above him, vast and comprehensive and still. He hung his head down in resignation, though it looked as if he waited for something, something he knew not what.

25

As Reggie Hunt emerged from the office into the late afternoon of a summer's day, he thought of the coldness that had come to prevail between him and the rest of the English community ever since the riot. They all treated him with a distant courtesy which did not disguise the fact that they looked upon him as a black sheep. It was mainly due to Tweetie's influence, and Hitchcock's, both of whom were very cut up on account of the ejection of de la Havre from the plantation. Not all the extra work he put in seemed to please Croft-Cooke. And surely this silent condemnation had nothing to do with his morals, because which of them could cast a stone? How many of them did not have coolie women? Hitchcock and Ralph did exactly what he had done, only they were bloody hypocrites and went about their business in an underhand, slimy way. And old Mac and Croft-Cooke had done the same before their marriages, in their younger days.

Perhaps the best thing would be for him to go home and get married and then come back and be thoroughly respectable. That would rehabilitate his position, he said to himself.

But that was a question of money, he thought, for how could he afford to keep a wife on less than six hundred, and his present pay only amounted to four-

fifty pounds a year?

It was not as if he were in the Civil Service, the police or the Army, where there was an extra wife allowance, horse allowance and overseas bonus. The Glasgow Tea Company was mean and niggardly, like a petty grocer, and you had no position unless you were a shareholder like Croft-Cooke, or Mac.

'If only that bloody swine of a father of mine would buy me some shares. But that is hoping for the impossible, so long as that bitch of a woman, my stepmother, is alive.'

Reggie thought of the heartless treatment she had accorded him when he was a child, having him kept at school even during the holidays, so that he might not come to Ivy House and become too chummy with his father. He had been so lonely then, except when he went to stay with his own mother who painted in London on the thirty shillings a week that his father gave her. Even those visits to his mother were sad, because of his mother's changing lovers. She had a knock of picking up those bloody Communists. He couldn't tell anyone what he felt. He had ached for a girl in those days, and yet he could date anyone except a barmaid. Tonbridge knew the boys of the school and one could not go out into the fields kissing as the Townies did, though he had once taken Olive into the woods at Chelmsford. And the landlady hated the very sight of him for some reason or another, and would certainly have told upon him to the headmaster, while at Camberley there was such strict discipline.

He had been glad to get out of England, though he had hated India the very moment he had arrived

at Madras to join his London regiment. For, coming up to the Fort St. George in the taxi, he had waited for a minute outside an Indian restaurant, and seen a number of half-naked, dhotied black men, with long tuft knots on their heads and sacred marks on their foreheads, eating curious sickly condiments with five fingers, rolling each mouthful of rice into the sauce and swallowing it with as loud a sucking noise as possible. He had felt sick at this and then the very sight of those dirty, unkempt, twisted men, especially of a blind man among them, who had surrounded him with illegible testimonials and petitioned for the job of his would-be servant, had disgusted him beyond endurance. Had not the fools any patience? Why did they clamour so and kick up such a din and row, and drive one mad with their hysterical complaints, complaints and protestations? They were all the same, these Orientals! He had had a foretaste of it at Port Said, the loud, dogged persistence with which they dragged you into their shops, and vociferously bargained over the price of everything, and cheated you over cigarettes as well as dirty picture postcards. 'Go to hell,' was the only slogan that he had found useful through his stay in India, to keep their dirty hands from touching his body.

How lonely he had felt on that first day of his arrival in India. For at dinner in the officers' mess that evening, nobody had taken any notice of him, because the General Office Commanding was being feasted, and he had gone out to the sea beach immediately after the toast to His Gracious Majesty the King-Emperor, to get out of the stuffy damp heat

that had covered him with sweat.

'Too damned cocksure, the new subaltern!,' the Colonel had said as he had returned into the drawing-room, unable to find relief in the turbid oily waters of the Indian Ocean.

And he had an uncanny feeling that he was fated to suffer at the hands of the Colonel.

Six months later, he had been sacked at Nowshera, on the North-Western Frontier by this very Colonel for insubordination, when he had had a row with one of the Indian officers.

If only, Reggie thought, the Colonel had known how he hated the hot and clammy country, how its crawling, black men, diseased and rotten, infuriated him, he would not have ended Reggie's career. He could not have felt very different about the natives, even though he had stayed long in India, and appreciated the loyalty and courage of the soldiers. And the planters, too, felt much the same.

The white man was accepted by these amorphous millions because he had courage, strength and determination, because he kept justice between them and prevented them from cutting each other's throats, and because he gave them money to buy such luxuries as beads, bangles, knives, calico, cotton and tobacco, and civilized them. They would have overrun the white race because of their sheer predominance in numbers if they had not been kept in check. They must be taught to become human beings, for they were a thousand years behind. And the white race could only rule them by putting the fear of God into them and by dealing with them severely when they played any monkey tricks, and with generosity when

they behaved. Surely all Englishmen were agreed on this, except renegades.

Reggie knew that he could get on with Afzal, his bearer, and that heaps of the sardars liked him for his personal qualities. And life was a sport, and he wanted to be happy. He would play any stakes for the fun of it, and damn everything else while there was polo and pig-sticking. A spot of polo, a woman and a drink and to hell with Croft-Cooke!

Why was he getting so bloody serious? He had been down in the dumps for days. He must shake it off and have a trot.

He began to walk a little more briskly, and lifted his head and looked around. Through the scattering fumes of the falling sun, he could see amid the labyrinthine boughs of the tangled tea-bushes standing larger than the stars of the camelias, a solitary young girl engaged in a late plucking. He felt a throb in his heart and a sudden dizzy urge in his head, and his limbs warmed with a restless vision of the liquescent plain where the fires of the day languished vast and vagrant.

He left the road on which he was walking and jumped across a ditch into the allotment where the girl was bending over the tea-bushes with her back towards him. The seething flame of a wild lust made him tense, and for a moment, he was half afraid of being noticed by anyone, as if they would see in the flush on his face all the content of his desire. But the curve of her arse sent the blood coursing to his loins, so that he advanced soul-wracked, storm-tossed, his temples drumming, his head swimming, his body limp with the lurid flow of sweat and an insane

hope for getting her. He rushed headlong up to his fate, and awkwardly flustered by the fact that she had taken no notice of his approach, planted his heels into the sodden earth, half a yard apart from each other, and gathering his arms towards her, asked:

‘What is your name?’

‘Leila,’ she whispered, without looking up. She had surreptitiously espied him and though the sudden pallor of fear had covered her face, and her heart had begun to palpitate, and her legs to crumble under her belly, she kept on plucking with the refrain under her lips: ‘Two leaves and a bud.’ She knew the Sahib from reputation, and she was afraid someone should see him so near her.

Reggie’s face coloured a vivid pink, his eyes glanced furtively and measured Leila. The virgin bloom of her face paled by fear and shame, her slim young body defined by the narrow girth of her skirt and the fine stretch of her bodice, her whole demeanour like a bird that would flutter in the hands of the shikari, fascinated him.

‘Come here,’ he ordered, knowing there was no other way of contact.

She waved her head in negation without looking up.

‘Come here,’ he repeated, ‘and look at this bush which you haven’t pruned.’

She was mortally afraid. She lifted her gaze towards the bush which was not well plucked, though she knew there was no such bush, for she had made a clear sweep of the tea flower in the immediate vicinity. She hung her head down and stood obsti-

nately still and self-contained.

'You—Gangu's daughter?' asked Reggie Hunt, in an easy tone, seeking to change his tactics and approach her with the aid of a more familiar manner.

Leila kept quiet and did not answer, although she was becoming dimly aware of the penalty she would have to pay for her behaviour.

Reggie could not control the giddy heat that swirled desperately in the length of his body and hovered like the perfumed spell of drunkenness on the incline of his stare. He stepped up to her and tried to put his arm round her waist once more.

With the tense and bitter sense of a cat threatened in the dark, she glided out of his grasp and stood looking wide-eyed and helpless before him. The serene trance of her absorption in work had ended in utter panic in the face of the Sahib's advances. And, though the abundance of her spirit surged in her breast, she was dumb like Time held spellbound by the fear of Death.

'Come to my bungalow,' Reggie Hunt said, 'I will give you a nose-ring and bangles.'

'Nahin!' the girl shrieked. 'Go away. I will call my father. I don't care who you are, whether you are a sahib or... Go away and let me work! My father will be angry if I don't get back home before the sun sets....' And, crying a weird half-moan, half-sob, she cast a round glance at the bare sky that stood still and white against the hills.

'Come, don't be silly,' said Reggie, chasing towards her.

'Hai! Hai!' she shrieked. And the fierce beating of her heart seemed to lapse into an empty spasm. And

she ran, her legs lagging behind her, the forepart of her body thrust forward.

The air reeked of the girl's youth, as Reggie smiled embarrassedly and walked towards his bungalow. The fierce passionate resolve he had made to have her at all costs mingled with the summer's prime and covered him with sweat. His whole body was tinged with the glow of heat in whose aura he could see the girl fluttering in the excitement of her despair. All the suppressed fury of his chagrin at her disobedience, as well as the welling up of that energy which had lain dormant since the Neogi woman affair, steeled him like clumsy iron. He crossed the bridge which covered the cataract of the river and made a short cut through the paddy and tea-bushes to the coolie lines.

Dusk was gathering above the valley to a single point of light in the nearest hut and there was a strange hush in the air, so that as Reggie walked up he could hear the thud thud of his own feet treading the earth as if forever. He could feel his breath come and go, as if he was the ghost of himself going to keep an appointment with the devil. And before his eyes, in the image of his desire, was a quivering fire, which blinded him to the recognition of his surroundings, so that he was left purely to his instincts, to the grooves of habit and to the accident of chance.

But his overpowering obsession had gathered up in all its madness the rudiments of direction, and as he strode through the scarlet darkness, he could see the shadows of the coolies' houses crawl towards him in definite shapes. He was perspiring hard as he got

to the incline on which Gangu's house stood, and for a moment he rested, heaved a sigh, phewed and drew his heart-strings together in a knot of silence. Then he looked around to see if anyone was about, for he felt like a thief.

A coolie woman was shouting at her children in the distance and a man was chopping wood in the barracks, but the coast as far as Gangu's hut was clear.

He took a step.

Suddenly, however, a man rushed by with a pitcher of water on his head. And Reggie was in a panic.

He could quieten them with a show of his hand or a word, he said to reassure himself and walked up.

His brain reeled. He could hear the clack-clack of his feet on the stones strewn about the edge of the barracks. He could feel the blood rushing up to it and congealing there in the sweat of uncertainty.

He was now before the house. He knew this was the house where he had first seen the girl some months ago, and if her father was Gangu, one of the ringleaders in the riots, this was where she lived.

He looked about to see if anyone was approaching. Not a soul in sight, though the noise of profuse coughing, talk and the bubbling of hubble-bubbles came from every side.

He tiptoed towards the hut, stopped and looked round again, then tapped the door and shouted.

'Hey come out. Come out, I want to talk to you.'

There was no answer, but he could hear voices whispering.

He applied his ear, but not being able to make anything out, he withdrew two yards away and stood with his back to the house.

Before he turned round, he saw Buddhu, Gangu's eight-year-old son at the door. His face was familiar to him from the many times the boy had salaamed him when he was riding a motor-bike.

'Ask your sister to come out,' Reggie said. 'I will give you a rupee.'

A rupee was too fabulous a sum to be real, and the Sahib seemed angry. Buddhu began to cry and ran towards Narain's hut, shrieking, 'Father, Father!'

Reggie was unnerved at this uproar.

Buddhu shrieked again and Reggie lost his head completely with the fear that the coolies would come and find him prowling about the barracks suspiciously.

Some faces appeared from the small windows. And there were shouts of 'Thief! Thief! ...'

He was full of fear. He shot at the dark sky with his revolver, once, twice.

The shots only tore the gloom above the boy's head. Reggie could still hear the shout, 'Father, Father!'

He wanted to run away, but he was face to face with Gangu at a distance of two yards.

'To hell with you,' he shouted, mad with anger. And he shot again, once, twice, thrice.

The man fell back with a groan.

Reggie turned on his feet and ran.

He felt Death itself was chasing him.

AFTER a trial lasting three days, Reginald Charles William Hunt, Assistant on the Macpherson Tea Estate, was brought up for judgment on the charge of murder or culpable homicide before Mr. Justice Mowberley and a jury of seven European and two Indian members.

The clerk of the court interrogated the jury:

'Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty of the murder of Gangu Singh, coolie, on the Macpherson Tea Estate?'

The foreman of the jury replied:

'We find him, by a majority vote, not guilty.'

The clerk of the court interrogated the jury:

'Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty of culpable homicide?'

The foreman of the jury replied:

'We find him, by a majority vote, not guilty.'

His Lordship addressing the prisoner, said:

'Prisoner at the Bar,

'An impartial jury has found you "not guilty" on the charge of murder or culpable homicide.

'I concur with the jury's view of the evidence.

'You are discharged.'

